The Pacific Islands are rapidly becoming more urbanised, with the mounting pressures on infrastructure, services and social relations well documented in recent Asian Development Bank (ADB) and Australian National University (ANU) publications. But the impacts of urban development go far beyond city boundaries — urban ecological footprints, economic multiplier effects and service catchments spill into surrounding regions. At the request of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) Secretary General, the ANU and the PIF Secretariat jointly held a workshop in December 2017 on the regional implications of urbanisation, including how countries can together address the challenges and opportunities. This In Brief summarises some of the issues discussed at that workshop by leading experts and elaborates on urban issues covered in the State of the Pacific Regional Report 2017.

Cities and the Region: Issues of Scale and Resilience

The benefits of well-functioning cities are multiple, particularly with respect to the economic development of nations, and indeed the region. Higher levels of urbanisation and economic development are closely correlated as evident from the recent World Migration Report 2015 and the 2012 State of Pacific Towns and Cities report. Cities as drivers of growth and development are a product of their central role as transport hubs, ICT (information and communication technology) facilitators, secondary and tertiary health and education service providers, and business incubators.

However, statistical correlations in the above reports can mask growing inequalities and destabilising social tensions emanating from poorly managed cities and underserviced rural areas. Local action alone cannot address urban opportunities or challenges which often range across sectors and levels of government, for example rural–urban migration affected by regional disparities, urban food and water security dependent on regional supply chains, and national and regional infrastructure needed to service growing urban economies. Coordinated local to regional action is needed to harness the development advantages of cities.

The value of considering the wider impacts of urban management is clear when examining how urban policy and programs affect national and regional resilience — an issue covered in the UN Habitat studies of urban climate vulnerability. The high concentration of people, communication networks and valuable infrastructure in cities can result in extensive human and economic impacts following major climate events. Regional agencies, working in collaboration with local, national and international bodies, are well placed to leverage the convening power and resources of initiatives such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the 2016 New Urban Agenda, international climate funds and assistance, and ADB programs aimed at moving from urban risk to national resilience (Jones and Sanderson 2017).

The multi-scalar and multi-sectoral characteristics of urban development have been recognised explicitly in four Pacific Urban Forums (2003, 2007, 2011, 2015) which addressed issues related to the effects of cities on social equity, social and environmental resilience, economic development, and urban governance, but recommendations to improve performance have not been strongly integrated into regional strategies or national plans and budgets. There has been a lack of clarity about which regional agency will lead on the Pacific urban agenda, and how that agenda will be translated into national action, particularly in atoll countries which face unique challenges.

Is There a Role for Pacific Regional Agencies?

Regional agencies have the capacity to develop urban policy frameworks and indicators that support comparative analysis and learning that is appropriate to the Pacific Island context. Current high urbanisation rates can be destabilising; managing them effectively requires an understanding of urban processes and trends. Data concerning urban change — demographic, economic and social — are often lacking, as are urban policy frameworks to help determine information needs. The UN-defined SDG for cities (SDG 11) provides a possible mechanism to improve regional data, providing that urban sustainability indicators are tailored to the unique characteristics of cities.
of Pacific Island cities with respect to land tenure, social relationships, governance and livelihoods. National and local governments will still lead but, similar to other issues of regional import, regional agencies can assist with analytical framing, data generation and technical expertise.

Networks will be key to progress. Without regional support, national and local governments and leaders struggle to evaluate and act on the social, economic, environmental and political implications of urban change (Kiddle et al. 2017). The established and technically competent regional agencies, such as the Pacific Community and the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme, could play a key role in improving urban management, sharing regional experience and mobilising resources.

Boosting policy reach and impact requires a regional approach capable of going beyond the technical and dealing with the political. Power dynamics and vested interests often frustrate urban planning mechanisms and intentions at lower levels of governance (Barbara and Keen 2017; McDonnell 2017). Higher levels of transparency and accountability help, and can be facilitated by regional partnerships, for example the ADB-encouraged reform of state-owned enterprises to improve accountability and service provision, and NGO work to enhance water, sanitation and hygiene in settlements.

What Are the Future Options?
Urban development is a game changer for Pacific Island countries, for better or for worse. Regional agencies have powerful convening power to support leadership and learning. To advance sustainable urban development, policy innovation suitable for Pacific contexts is needed. Developing indicators and knowledge-sharing networks at the regional level may be effective given national resource constraints. Elevating urban development on the regional agenda could also help enhance its political importance and shape how the international community engages in the Pacific across a wide array of urban issues under the auspices of SDGs, donor initiatives, donor initiatives and partnerships.

Not all urban issues are well suited to regional action, but the workshop found that some aspects of urban development are worthy of consideration, including:

- What measures are effective for strengthening urban resilience and adding to national and regional development and stability?
- How is rapid urban development in the region likely to affect food and water security?
- What policy initiatives in Pacific cities can reduce destabilising urban tensions related to access to land and resources?
- How can resources be mobilised in small island states to support urban sustainable development initiatives?

- Is there a ‘Pacific Way’ to achieve sustainable urban development through better combining the qualities of both customary and Western legally-based urban management systems?
- How can transparency and accountability measures help to define who has rights and responsibilities for Pacific Island cities?

Global networks can help to increase options and support policy innovation, but the Pacific also has insights to offer and could play a greater role in shaping regional and international agendas, as it has done for climate change and oceans governance. The forthcoming Regional Sustainable Development Report 2018, 9th World Urban Forum 2018, and the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) Asia-Pacific Sustainable Cities report 2019 could all be vehicles for projecting a Pacific perspective on urban development. The security dimensions of rapid urbanisation could also be explored as part of regional dialogues such as Biketawa Plus, SDGs, and the Framework of Resilient Development in the Pacific. A possible first step may be to establish a regional agency working group to take forward pertinent recommendations from the World Urban Forum and the 2015 Pacific Urban Forum.

Acknowledgements
This paper and the workshop are part of the DPA Urban Development research program which is funded by the ANU and DFAT Pacific Research Program.

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