

Visions for Henderson: A Workshop on Managing Peri-Urban Growth in Solomon Islands

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In most Pacific nations, urban growth far exceeds planning capacity and designated urban zones, resulting in people spilling into jurisdictions not covered by urban planning schemes or city council services (ADB 2016). In Solomon Islands, rapid urbanisation is leading to unplanned urban expansion, inequitable access to development benefits, and feelings of marginalisation — some familiar themes from assessments of factors that led to the ‘Tensions’ (Allen 2013:56–60) and still cause social friction. With available land in Honiara nearly exhausted, development pressures are being felt in Guadalcanal province, particularly in Henderson — an area east of Honiara encompassing the international airport as well as mushrooming market, retail and commercial developments.

Boundaries between Honiara and Guadalcanal appear well defined on maps, but, on the ground, these lines are blurred with people and goods easily flowing between the two, and settlements straddling jurisdictions. The reach of services such as waste and sanitation to the peri-urban areas in Guadalcanal are patchy given their distance from existing utility networks and service provision zones. Peri-urban areas, such as Henderson, could benefit from a more integrated and inclusive approach to urban planning for the greater Honiara area, particularly if development opportunities are to be harnessed and regional harmony sustained.

In August 2016, the ANU partnered with Guadalcanal Provincial Government to convene a workshop to explore visions, priorities, and options for the future development of Henderson. The workshop was designed to support a constructive dialogue on urban development opportunities. This In Brief sets out key insights raised by stakeholders during the workshop and analyses how future research and policy engagement could better address rapid urbanisation in Guadalcanal. Around 30 participants attended the workshop from national, provincial and local government agencies, members of the Guadalcanal Provincial Assembly, and

community groups. The enthusiasm to create new pathways for local urban development was strong.

Getting (Community-Supported) Action

Participants were acutely aware of the significance of peri-urban development issues given the history of the ‘Tensions’ and ongoing sensitivities around urban migration, land ownership and access to economic opportunities. Many commented that the workshop was the first time since the ‘Tensions’ that peri-urban development issues had been officially discussed and that such discussions were well overdue. As one participant reflected, Guadalcanal is ‘at a stage where we need expertise to develop awareness of what development can bring, both good and bad, and how we can strike a balance between the two’.

There was widespread recognition of the opportunities that could be gained from better planned urban development in Henderson, but participants stressed that planning needs to be more inclusive — no forums exist to give voice to community concerns. Information is scarce on the new developments springing up. Gender exclusions also persist, with one women’s group representative noting ‘we want to be included in any development taking place at Henderson ... we understand that there are conditions to be met, including environmental, social and economic, and women can be inclusive [*sic*] in all of these facets of development’. Youth representatives observed that long-term planning and commitment appear to be lacking: ‘it’s one thing to build something, it’s another to look after it’; the next generation would ‘pay the price’ for poor development choices. Despite the concerns, there was a general level of support for development and a common vision for Henderson as a gateway to Honiara as ‘a modern town, the face of the city’.

The Challenges Ahead

The technical and political challenges ahead were well recognised. While in theory the laws and powers exist to better

manage urban growth, in practice planning mechanisms do not affect outcomes: 'today everyone is free to do what they want'. The Honiara Local Planning Scheme (HTPB 2015) does not address peri-urban development beyond the city boundaries, and current efforts to develop a Henderson LPS will likely take some time before it will be in place. Key technical challenges stem from the lack of capacity to enforce building and development codes and laws, further hindered by the lack of revenue. Institutional arrangements were unclear, a senior Guadalcanal provincial officer lamented that 'there is no clarity on the provincial government's role in terms of managing urbanisation' and existing powers are not fully used — for example, few provinces have a functioning Town and Country Planning Board.

Participants were conscious of the deeper political economy challenges shaping Henderson's development. Land ownership and the control of productive resources in the Henderson area was seen as a particular challenge, which marginalised communities and limited scope for inclusive development. One participant noted that 'land is the catalyst of [social and security] problems'. Perceived inequitable funding from the national government, service provision which favoured Honiara, and the lack of support for, and economic benefits from, customary land development in Guadalcanal province were all aired as major challenges.

Critical Junctures and Pathways for Development

Participants were aware of the difficulties of putting Henderson's development squarely on political and policy agendas. Part of the challenge was changing the way urban people and politicians view Henderson — that is, as an important part of Greater Honiara rather than a separate rural community. One stakeholder noted the need to better acknowledge the continuous flow of services, people and influences from between the city and adjacent Guadalcanal areas. Handled well, geography could be an asset. For example, proximity could allow Guadalcanal to capture benefits from national events such as the Pacific Festival of Arts in 2012, which resulted in infrastructure development for road improvements in Henderson. The upcoming 2023 Pacific Games, which Solomon Islands will host, is another such opportunity. Accommodation and facilities for the Games could be located in Henderson, helping to expand infrastructure and services such as housing, waste disposal and water treatment facilities, and create new sources of provincial revenue and amenity.

A proactive approach is still needed, however, to resolve issues that have been critical for other major developments such as Tina River Hydro, including clear procedures for accessing customary land, and structuring benefit-sharing arrangements among landowners and government agencies. Given the urgency for timely action, participants thought this could be a good topic for a future workshop in order to ensure that national government deliberations have strong and supportive community roots.

Participants were acutely aware of the importance of political agency in addressing Henderson's development, but also the difficulties in exercising it given the diverse forms of local land tenure following central and colonial governments' alienation of customary land for public and private use. As a senior Guadalcanal provincial officer summarised, 'we don't own the land, but we can control what we put on it'. There was a strong desire by Gual participants to become drivers, rather than 'spectators of urban development'. While progressing Henderson's development would not be easy, participants felt strongly that 'the absence of formal planning should not legitimise a lack of action'. Participants were keen to obtain support from development partners and the private sector to help them progress urban management and investment.

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