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HOW CAN URBAN HOUSING  
AND SETTLEMENT ISSUES BE  
EFFECTIVELY ADDRESSED IN  
PAPUA NEW GUINEA?

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## Abstract

- Current marginality and spatial inequality in housing and urban settlements have been shaped by colonial practices which have perpetuated over time.
- Settlements have emerged and increased over the years in response to unmet housing needs due to a shortage of land and increasing costs of housing.
- Settlement evictions have devastating effects on settlers; therefore, the government should ensure that resettlement plans are in place before eviction exercises take place.
- A comprehensive human settlement policy aimed to improve both urban and rural housing and basic services needs to be developed. Improving rural living conditions will create incentives for rural people to remain at home and limit migration to urban areas.

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## HOW CAN URBAN HOUSING AND SETTLEMENT ISSUES BE EFFECTIVELY ADDRESSED IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA?

By **Elizabeth Kopel & Busa Jeremiah Wenogo**

### Introduction

Planned settlements are officially sanctioned self-help housing areas that are provided with infrastructure and basic services. Unplanned settlements have not been designated by authorities, and in most cases, are deemed illegal squatters without services (Kopel, 2002). Chand and Yala (2008) referred to the formal and informal housing where the formal comprise housing that meets building regulations, and informal to be housing that does not conform to regulatory specifications. Those who are subject to eviction are squatter settlers, illegally occupying alienated land, under freehold title and owned by the State, an individual or private sector organisation.

In Papua New Guinea (PNG), the difference between the two types of settlements is not clear as many of the older planned settlements have spilled over the original boundaries. Squatter settlements are not unique to PNG, these exist all over the developing world and is part of the urbanisation process (Drakakis-Smith, 2000). Unfortunately, governments are usually not well prepared and often end up playing a catch-up game where population growth and migration from rural to urban or from one urban centre to another outpaces housing and services provision (Aldrich and Sandhu, 1995).

This paper is informed by research conducted on housing policy and urban settlements in Port Moresby over the years (Kopel 2002; Chand and Yala, 2008; Kopel et al., 2023). The paper focuses on settlements and evictions in Port Moresby which have become more frequent over the last decade affecting increasing numbers of settlement dwellers than elsewhere in the country. It starts with an analysis of the historical factors that have laid the foundation of spatial and social inequality of human settlements by the colonial administration which continue to this day. This is followed by a brief outline of the factors that drive increasing squatter settlements, the diverging views of settlement dwellers and the challenges of addressing settlement concerns through a comprehensive urbanisation and human settlements policy. The paper concludes with policy recommendations.

### Background: Where have we come from?

The seeds of socio-spatial marginality and inequality were planted by the colonial administration in the way secluded free housing and fringe benefits were offered to Australian civil servants as an enticement to come and work in the territory (Chand and Yala, 2008; Kopel, 2002; Stretton, 1979). Indigenous low-income earners and casual labourers were considered as temporary visitors, who would return to their land and were housed in single dormitory-type accommodation while domestic workers were housed in 'boi hauses' within the premises of their employers. However, with the easing of vagrancy laws, which limited freedom of movement, more people started migrating into town, many accompanied by their families (Godard, 2005; Kopel, 2002).

In the late 1960s, planned settlements for low-cost housing were established by the colonial administration in peripheral areas under the National Housing Commission to cater for those whose housing needs were not met (Stretton, 1979). These settlements were provided with roads, street lighting, and water while some settlements were provided with basic shelter with just one or two rooms which could be improved over time by settlers as and when their personal circumstances improved. Following independence in 1975, the Settlement Services Division of the National Housing Commission continued to be responsible for settlement matters while benefits previously enjoyed by expatriates under the colonial administration were transferred to PNG nationals who were slowly transitioning to occupy those positions (Kopel, 2002; Stretton, 1979).

With the formation of the National Housing Corporation (NHC) through amalgamation of the Department of Housing and National Housing Commission in 1989, the responsibility for settlements was transferred to provinces and the function of the NHC changed to developing and selling land for housing purposes. This meant that in Port Moresby, the function of settlements was transferred to the National Capital District Commission (NCDC). This major shift in the transfer of a core function requires mammoth levels of investment of resources. However, NCDC's social planner at that time noted that without the necessary allocation of resources and a clear implementation strategy, the Commission was unable to undertake this major

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function (Wrondimi, 1994). This marked the beginning of the government withdrawing from playing any active role in facilitation, coordination or provision of settlements and housing. For more than 30 years (1989-2023), there has not been any intervention to address the housing needs of the increasing population, new entrants to employment, the middle, low-income earners, and those depending on the informal economy for livelihoods.

The great Australian dream of owner-occupied housing was transferred to Papua New Guinea early on just after independence through the Morgan Report of 1977 and sold off all government-owned houses to sitting tenants (Kopel, 2002; Stretton, 1979). This idea was reiterated in 1981 through the Newell Report which led to the first National Home Ownership Scheme through a government guarantee scheme that was implemented by many employers: South Pacific Brewery, Air Niugini, Electricity Commission and Post and Telecom (Kopel, 1991). Recently the government has reintroduced another First Home Ownership Scheme by parking funds with Bank South Pacific (BSP) to be accessed for owner-occupied housing (Wangi, 2019). All these interventions have and continue to benefit only those at the upper end of the income scale, while those who are genuinely excluded from housing, and need help the most have and continue to miss out completely (Wangi, 2019, Kopel, 2022). PNG's developments mirror historical processes in other cities which perpetuate marginalism and inequality in access to housing, education, health, employment, and other services. Historical forms of disadvantage create new forms of disadvantage that keep specific groups on the sidelines, creating poverty and inequality (Chica-Mejia et al., 2022).

### What drives the growth of squatter settlements?

The issue of settlements is symptomatic of deeper underlying issues of social disadvantage, deprivation, and inequality, coupled with a lack of appropriate policy, planning and strategic implementation. With population increase over the years, the supply of new low-cost, affordable housing has remained almost stagnant and has not kept pace with demand. Most people who could not afford housing in the formal housing market have turned to self-help housing (Webster et al., 2016).

With planned settlements bursting to capacity, settlements have encroached onto unplanned state, private and customary-owned land. Available estimates from over a decade ago were that 45 percent of Port Moresby's population live in settlements (UN Habitat, 2010; Chand and Yala, 2008) with estimates now standing at almost 50 percent (Rooney, 2021). Increasing rural to urban migration has also contributed to fuel the demand for housing and services (Kavan and Kopel,

2022; Chand and Yala, 2008).

Further, the limited supply of urban land in Port Moresby is almost exhausted. Land shortages have progressively led to high values and the prices of housing built to western standards are exorbitantly high, increasing to the point where these are well beyond the affordability of ordinary people (Iwong and Kopel, 2020; Webster et al., 2016). Unlike in developed countries, the private rental housing sector in Port Moresby is a lucrative industry providing housing at extremely high rates, catering to the needs of business houses and executive managers. Those whose housing needs are not met by the formal housing market, both salaried employees and informal workers opt for self-help or rental accommodation in settlements (Chand and Yala, 2008; Kopel, 2002).

Both planned and squatter settlements play a vital role in providing a cheaper housing option for the city's population. The types of housing in squatter areas vary considerably, ranging from well-constructed dwellings comparable to formal housing in suburbs to makeshift shelters (Godard, 2005). Settlement dwellers comprise of people from diverse socio economic, cultural, and provincial backgrounds as tenants or landlords providing housing for others. Contrary to the stereotype negative view of settlements as being populated by criminals and the unemployed, most people are employed in formal jobs or informal income generation activities (Godard, 2005:11).

NRI's recent research evidence from Taurama Valley shows that lack of unmet housing needs has led settlers to informally enter into agreements to access customary land for housing (Kopel et al., 2023). Though informal agreements provide no definite guarantee or protection over the land settled on, living on customary land through informal arrangements appears to be far more secure than settlement on freehold land where evictions can occur anytime.

### Diverging public perceptions of settlers

The issue of settlements is contentious with differing views, depending on one's socio-economic and professional position, interests, values and outlook on development and life. Those with concerns about reducing inequality and improving living conditions and enhancement of social welfare of the masses sympathise with squatter settlers (Tally, 2022; Post Courier, 2020).

However, those who view settlers from a negative perspective, regard them as being responsible for the city's social woes - land invasion, obstructing orderly development and illegally occupying lands. The stereotype negative views of settlers are exacerbated by the growing issues of ethnic violence and law and order in the city. This shifts public opinion against

settlers and specific groups of migrants, which fuel the enforcement of police raids and eviction exercises (Rooney, 2021; Godard, 2005). This perception conceals and does not give any visibility to the material and human rights violations that are endorsed by the State through the engagement of law enforcement agencies.

The hard-line, draconian views mirror the colonial administrative reluctance to recognise and control permanent settlements in urban areas (Koczberski et al., 2001). In the 'Unseen City', Michael Goddard eloquently describes the derogatory, negative, stereotypical portrayal of settlements as 'habitats of the unemployed, the penurious and the criminal' (Goddard, 2005:10).

Contrary to the stereo type negative imaging of settlements as shanty towns, breeding criminals, many of these places are bustling and thriving with creative economic activity. These places are home to so many hardworking people such as:

- taxi and bus operators who move the city's population;
- poultry farmers who supply cheaper local protein;
- open markets vendors who feed the city with cheaper and healthy fresh food;
- security guards that protect business houses and offices;
- cleaners who keep streets and offices clean;
- gardeners who beautify the city; and
- homeowners who provide cheaper rental accommodation for working people.

Put simply, settlements are inhabited by people who contribute to the development of the city. Even graduates in the civil service and private sector jobs end up living in settlements due to the housing crisis. This exhibits Goddard's perspective of the unseen city, as a place characterised by creative and dynamic grassroots responses to the urban aftermath of colonial rule. This is not to deny that there are elements of troublemakers, crime, drugs and so on in settlements; these issues are also present in formally planned suburbs (Goddard, 2005).

## Are current approaches to addressing the issue of urban settlements and housing appropriate?

### Mass evictions

Squatting on freehold land is a precarious existence as occupants can be evicted at any time. Major settlement evictions in NCD were conducted progressively in quick succession in recent years without any resettlement plans for those affected. Evictions involving State land have

become the subject of lengthy court cases, but these trend to favour legal property rights over the land, that is the legally registered owner of the title (Rooney, 2021). Human rights of communities impacted by evictions are rarely considered in these cases and there is no avenue to address settler concerns.

Examples of recent series of evictions include Air Transport Squadron (ATS) portion 695; Erima; Bush Wara; Garden Hill; June Valley and Morata portion 2733. There are no resettlement plans for almost all evicted settlers except those at Erima, but they have yet to be resettled. The exact number of people affected by these eviction exercises is not known with media reports providing only estimates numbering in thousands. Further, ownership of land occupied by settlers is sometimes contested by various parties as was the case with portion 695 at the ATS. Settlers often have no knowledge of who owns what parcel of land they are residing on and therefore, waste time and money developing it or engaging in costly legal battles that yield unsatisfactory outcomes.

Forced evictions are extremely destructive and cause huge social and economic losses for people involved. Those who are displaced lose their homes and everything. Livelihoods are adversely affected as workers lose jobs based on informal income generation activities in settlements or cannot get to work, and children cannot get to school. Evictions also affect many tenants who depend on cheaper informal rental accommodation who lose their possessions and housing. This is supported by evidence from a recent study on informal economy which found that rental accommodation alongside informal money lending have emerged as important income generation activities in the informal economy in the last two decades (Stanley, 2019).

Currently there are no mechanisms to support tenants and complaints related to settlement housing and evictions. The courts are inaccessible and there is no clear legal framework to address these issues (Rooney, 2021). Further, there is no help available for the invisible and psychological impact on children and families who are affected by forced evictions. Being silent and failing to take any action on this issue portrays the image that authorities care little about the common people and protect the interests of the landed rich and business houses.

This raises the question of what kind of a future we want to build for our children and future generations. Do we want a city that is inclusive of all social and economic groups, or a city that is spatially and socially marginalised and divided that most people have no place in it?

### Government policy

The growth of settlements and poor housing have never been viewed from a broader perspective as a function of urban



development planning. Similarly, rural to urban migration has not been considered with reference to poor governance and service delivery, an escape from rural disadvantage, hardship, and poverty (Koczberski et al., 2001).

A key intervention to address these challenges is the National Land Development Program to attract customary land for development and housing, but effective coordination and management of activities remain wanting. The existing home ownership financing arrangement in partnership with Bank South Pacific, as noted above by passes the people who are in most need of assistance (Wangi, 2019; Aleker, 2016; Kopel, 2002).

To address issues of urbanisation and settlements, a National Urbanisation Policy 2010-2030 was adopted in 2010 (Office of Urbanisation, 2010). This policy was informed by experience of implementation of various pilot projects on both customary and State land over five years. It is quite comprehensive in the thematic urbanisation issues, policy focus areas and anticipated outcomes from intervention activities. However, 12 years on, this policy remains to be adequately supported by the government and implemented.

An essential component missing from the policy are the rural-urban linkages as both rural and urban issues must be addressed hand in hand. The focus on addressing urban issues alone without intervention in the rural is hugely problematic because unattended to rural issues will continue to overspill into urban areas. This includes support for rural development, addressing poverty reduction and the management of growth of districts as well as enhancing the effectiveness of the institutional, policy and legal framework governing the development of the rural areas while working on managing urbanisation issues. This requires a holistic perspective. Policy interventions must be all-encompassing with a focus on improving human settlements, health, living standards and the well-being for all people irrespective of where they live. Similarly, Aleker (2016) contended that a holistic approach is needed to develop affordable housing which caters for the needs of all social groups.

### **The exclusion of housing needs of the majority exacerbates housing inequality**

Our settlement woes are indicative of the State not providing a comprehensive housing policy (Kutan, 2021; Webster et al., 2016) to provide an enabling environment to facilitate and set strategic direction for improving housing and human settlements.

The issue of affordable housing and settlements must be addressed in a meaningful way by facilitating the development of inclusive towns and cities to improve housing and living

standards for all. This includes improving rural housing and development that caters for their needs too. Webster et al. (2016) highlighted the supply side, demand side and regulatory functions of various stakeholders that must be addressed to effectively address the housing crisis with the State playing an enabling, coordinating and facilitating role.

The reactive ongoing settlement eviction exercises demonstrate Rooney's (2021) statement regarding State-sponsored eviction orders as reinforcing the idea of building a city for the well-to-do without regard for most ordinary people. 'In a city where land values have progressively increased, and where housing built to Western standards is prohibitively expensive for most people, forced evictions reinforce the marginalisation of residents of settlements, and deepen housing vulnerability and inequality' (Rooney, 2021).

Forced evictions do not solve the issue of settlements, these only recycle the problem. When people are evicted from one location without any planned resettlement, they are homeless for a while. Eventually they find another location to settle on and the problem is recycled as the process of squatting on another piece of land starts over. It is not feasible to control or prevent rural-urban migration. Any suggestion of forced repatriation of migrants back to their provinces of origin by introducing coercive measures such as vagrancy regulations and hunting down unemployed people borders on breach of constitutional and human rights.

### **Recent political statements on settlements**

In response to the rising number of evictions in the National Capital District (NCD), the Prime Minister and elected leaders from NCD have all made political statements in support of finding a lasting solution to the settlement issue. Without a clear policy relating to settlements, the views of different elected leaders regarding settlements/settlers have been inconsistent and transmit conflicting messages to the public.

Under the leadership of Moresby South MP, Justin Tkatchenko as Minister of Lands and Physical Planning, NCD Governor Powes Parkop and Moresby Northeast MP, John Kaupa, the idea of converting settlements to suburbs was proposed (Post Courier Editorial, 2020). This proposal intended that all currently squatted on land should be properly acquired from State or customary landowners, surveyed, subdivided and titles issued to occupants. In line with this purpose, the Governor's office attempted to resettle Erima dwellers prior to eviction, but this was unsuccessful due to delays in granting approval by the Department of Lands and Physical Planning (Tally, 2022).

The Prime Minister (PM) assured parliament that the government was looking at seeking a “permanent solution” to address settlement issues in the city. In the same statement, the Prime Minister also warned settlers not to “bring their nails, saw and hammer onto State land as the government will not hesitate to send them back to their province” (Elapa, 2022). Newspaper reports mentioned of the PM intending to set up a task force to be headed by the Minister for Housing and Urbanisation to “look into converting settlement properties into titled properties for those who can fully justify their living in cities and towns”. Consequently, the Ministry for Lands was instructed to halt all eviction exercises until displaced settlers were properly relocated.

In complete contrast, Tkatchenko’s successor, John Rosso’s leadership flipped this line of thinking on its back and took a contradictory approach. Rosso issued an ultimatum of one month for all squatters to vacate and refrain from occupying State land (Post Courier, 2020). The confusion caused by two different ministers who contradicted each other epitomises the difficulties of decision making without a comprehensive and long-term policy on housing and settlements. Political statements for State intervention to address settlement issues must be rooted in long-term policies and strategies for implementation.

## Recommendations

Several recommendations are provided below for a way forward.

- The plight of housing needs of more than 50 percent of Port Moresby’s residents can no longer be ignored. The growth of informal settlements must be accepted as part of urbanisation and must be addressed by the government.
- A comprehensive national approach to improving housing and human settlements is needed to facilitate the development of an inclusive society. Intervention strategies need to have a two-pronged approach to address both the urban and rural needs and improve housing and living standards.
  - o Urban: Government must realise and acknowledge that we are building towns and cities where most of our people are priced out of the housing market with extreme spatial and housing inequality. Urban development plans for Port Moresby or provincial towns need to take a different approach by incorporating the housing needs of all segments of the population.

- o Rural: Improving rural human settlements (housing, electricity connection, water) must be a part of a holistic approach to improving standards of living for all and leaving no one behind. This extends to include improving governance and other areas of service delivery. If living conditions in villages improve, people will not be pushed or pulled to the city in search of a better life.
- There is a need for legislative reforms, and greater clarity on the roles and responsibilities of State actors to protect human rights. This requires an independent monitoring mechanism to ensure that property and human rights are protected in eviction processes.
- Evictions have serious social and economic costs and effects on settlement dwellers and the wider economy. Those undertaking evictions must ensure that resettlement plans are in place in consultation with urban authorities before enforcing any eviction exercise.
- An audit of all land in Port Moresby and other urban centres with settlements is needed to determine ownership status for settlers and conduct public awareness. More importantly, settlers should not move into any land before legal acquisition or being permitted rights of access and occupancy.

## Conclusion

Current policy and public perception of approaches to addressing housing and related concerns continue to mirror the influence of the colonial legacy of housing. These underlying biases have shaped the development of Port Moresby as a city marked by social and spatial inequalities. Contemporary settlements are important to the city’s economy and respect for people and property must prevail in the enforcement of evictions. Housing policy must be seen from a wider perspective of improving living standards and the welfare of the entire country, for all urban dwellers and rural people.

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