



# Linking Population and Environment A Key Issue for Sustainable Development

**Most** Pacific island populations are growing at a moderate to high pace. Over the last decade, population growth rates have remained steady or increased, slowing almost only where there is significant out-migration. Even if fertility rates decline soon, island populations will continue to grow for at least one more generation as so many Pacific islanders are still young.

Population growth is a significant concern, but not the sole one. It is one factor in a complex combination with economics, environmental changes and government policy that direct the overall pattern of change. Population growth will not be the only cause of long-term environmental disaster but it may speed up the onset of the consequences of poor resource management.

## Population and environmental links

Population and environment issues are linked in two important ways:

- ✘ the size and other characteristics of a human population are related to the impact of human activities on the environment.

✘ environmental changes through increased populations, technological change and economic activities directly affect the quality of life of Pacific islanders, including their culture and traditions.

It is not simply a matter how many people there are. Equally important are how much new lifestyles, technologies and economic practices consume resources and generate wastes; and ways in which access to resources has changed and become imbalanced.

## Uneven development a feature

Uneven development is a feature of the Pacific region. People and economic activity are often concentrated in the same places.

This linking of people and economic activity - particularly where there is also poorly planned development, weak urban government and overtaxed urban services - has serious environmental and economic consequences on small islands.

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Pacific people - putting their environment under increasing pressure.

Photo: SPREP

## A Key Development Issue

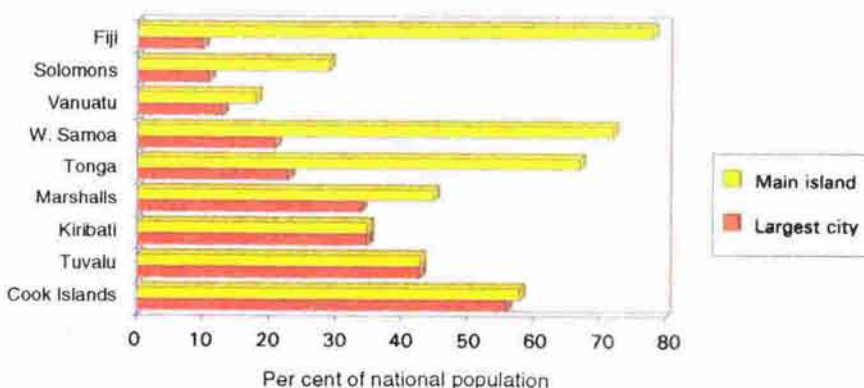
The Ministerial Meeting on Population and Sustainable Development in the Pacific, held at Port Vila, Vanuatu in September 1993, identified links between population and environment as a key development issue for the region. Ministers and senior officials from 19 Pacific countries recognised that population issues must be integrated into all policies and programmes for economic and social development and the environment.

Echoing widespread concern of the region over environmental threats, such as nuclear testing, ocean dumping of radioactive and toxic wastes, and possible sea-level rise, the *Port Vila Declaration* promised support for policies that minimise environmental damage and the impact on peoples' health and welfare.

Global climate change and possible sea-level rise would have severe consequences for Pacific islands. Both the causes and effects of global climate change are beyond the control of Pacific island countries. Yet even at an early stage global climate change would have serious economic and social repercussions on the small, low-lying islands of the region, on the coastal zones of all other islands, and in high altitude areas, particularly in Papua New Guinea. Some Pacific islanders could even become environmental refugees.

The *Port Vila Declaration* asks the international community to fully recognise these critical threats and commit resources to mitigate economic and social impacts on Pacific Islands. ♦♦♦

Population concentration in main island and largest city





Where numbers of people are growing fast - especially in some urban communities - some people no longer have adequate access to essentials such as sanitation and clean water. Environmental resources are still ravaged in the name of economic development - this is short-sighted. Few natural resources base will not support sustained economic activity, nor will it provide people a decent quality of life.

Deteriorating island environments are induced by humans, but degradation is often faster than the population growth rate. Degradation is related to two factors:

- ☒ concentrations of economic activity and population which are symptoms of uneven development; and,
- ☒ over-exploitation of natural resources.



*With most urban areas on the coast, growing populations are severely damaging coastal environments.*

*Photo: SPREP*

### **Daily activities are important**

Less obvious but more widespread damage is caused by people's everyday activities and the powerful tools they now use, such as chain saws, bull-dozers, out-board motors, fine-mesh fishing nets and pesticides.

Resource consumption is growing quickly, not just because there are more people but also because of new lifestyles, expanding commercial enterprise and rising demand for natural resource-based commodities - such as industrial crops, timber and minerals-- from the rest of the world.

### **Careful management is vital**

Careful resource management is vital for environmental protection. Many governments lack appropriate legislation, or do not take effective action to limit damage, or have limited jurisdiction over landuse.

The use of marginal lands for farming, deforestation and accelerated soil erosion are due to inappropriate land use as well as growing population densities. Island farmers use pesticides so dangerous that they are banned elsewhere in the world. Poor regulation of logging companies allows timber resources to be plundered. The ravaging of environmental resources in the name of economic development is short-sighted and misguided.

## **SPREP's Environment and Population Project**

SPREP's Environment and Population project began in July 1993, with support from the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). It will assist Pacific island governments and communities use information about population composition, growth, and distribution in the decisions they make about their environment. It also will ensure that population is well considered in SPREP's other technical programmes.

In co-ordinating environmental and population concerns, SPREP recognises that it is unrealistic to address concerns about the environment and sustainable development without addressing population issues. ◆◆◆



*Careful planning and political commitment is needed to stop urban areas from encroaching further into economically vital ecosystems such as mangroves.*

*Photo: SPREP*

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## *Sustainable development - a must*

Pacific islanders must be committed to the ideals of sustainable development. Our islands must remain as viable homes for the next generations.

International meetings agreed that to achieve sustainable development, the main goals must be to protect the environment and to share the benefits of economic development. If this is so, then poverty is alleviated, livelihoods are secured, and good health and quality of life are safeguarded.

## *Linking population issues to better environmental management*

The more policy-makers understand about the links between demographic and economic change in this region, the better they can direct national economic and social change. They need to know if plans and policies affecting social and economic conditions are consistent with plans and policies which will affect demographic conditions, and vice versa.

Governments can better integrate population and development issues in three ways:

- ✘ improve the overall understanding about the relationships between population, environment and development;
- ✘ integrate population factors into national development plans; and,
- ✘ develop frameworks that ensure this integration also occurs locally.

Implementing policies that minimize severe ecological damage, and its effects on human health and welfare, are essential. This requires:

- ✘ better knowledge of population and environment relationships on Pacific islands;

- ✘ support to develop the region's institutional capacity to conduct the necessary research and policy analysis;
- ✘ use of projected demographic trends and consumption patterns in planning;
- ✘ administrative systems which reward and assist co-operative, inter-sectoral planning;
- ✘ political commitment to these policies.

Appropriate government policies will slow population growth, rationalise population distribution, alleviate poverty, reduce environmentally dangerous consumption, and encourage the use of appropriate technologies, so reducing the impact of human activities on the fragile environment of the Pacific islands.

## **Actions expected from the SPREP Project**

The Environment and Population project has resources to:

- help co-ordinate national policy positions on population and environment;
- promote public discussion about common concerns on environment and population issues, and to present a forum to resolve these concerns;
- produce effective public information material;
- help environment units and other government departments use information about population composition, growth and distribution in and planning environmental management, or provide other technical assistance as required;
- assist relevant research activities;
- run short workshops in population-planning skills - particularly in conjunction with other environmental issues;
- provide technical and financial resources to produce school curriculum materials that have both an environment and a population content and purpose;
- assist community projects in areas of particular environmental stress and population pressure; and,
- conduct community workshops, training sessions and seminars on community development strategies.

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*Growing populations demand more food and infrastructure to satisfy their daily requirements.*

*Photo: SPREP*



## Environment and Population Officer

SPREP's Environment and Population Officer is available to:

- assist governments to co-ordinate their national policy positions on population and on environment;
  - provide technical assistance to environment, planning, and other government departments for environment and population issues;
  - run short workshops in population planning skills;
  - assist people from the region to attend short-term training courses;
  - support research into population-environment and analysis; and,
  - help improve public information and education about connections between population and environment issues.
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### More Information

For more information on linkages between environment and population in the Pacific islands, and on SPREP's project in this area, please contact:

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## Community Development Officer

SPREP's Community Development Officer will work to:

- establish an information exchange network between local and international NGOs who are working with communities to improve environment management;
  - complement on-going community projects in areas of particular environmental stress by providing population inputs;
  - conduct community workshops, training sessions and seminars on community development strategies;
  - help prepare educational materials that meet the needs of community groups; and,
  - assist community groups to secure long-term solutions to environment and development problems in their locality, through small loans from other funding sources.
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*Pacific island children - the region's future. But will they know Pacific island life as their parents knew it?*

*Photo: SPREP.*



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