Mobile, youthful and gendered: the social dimensions of inequality in the Pacific

By Yvonne Underhill-Sem[2]

Key argument: Social inequality in SIDS is amplified by various forms of population mobility, growing numbers of young people and the persistent disempowerment of women.

Introduction

Although the combined population of the Pacific region (at around 12 million, with 7 million in PNG alone) is microscopic, a mere 0.1 percent of global population, the region has global strategic significance both politically and from a marine resources perspective. Politically, we constitute almost 6 percent of UN member states (11 out of 193 member states) making us, for instance, an important part of the UN Asia Pacific Group as well as other groupings such as the Small Island Developing States (SIDS). From a marine resources perspective, our combined Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) is a whopping 30 million sq. km (including CI and Nuie but not NZ and Australia)(Gillett 2011).

These metrics are likely to be very familiar, as are those which represent the diversity of human development in the region; Palau, in the north Pacific, is 60th on the 2014 UN Human Development Index and PNG, in the West, is 157th. The 2010 Pacific MDG report shows the diversity of social development in the region with broad agreement that terrestrial rich countries with large populations in the western Pacific face greater development challenges than those countries in the eastern Pacific with smaller populations, fewer terrestrial resources but larger EEZs. However across the Pacific, poverty is increasingly understood as multi-dimensional (Dili International Conference 2013, Morris 2011, Alkire & Santos 2014).

The Pacific region demonstrates clearly that size has no monopoly on inequality. Regardless of population size and level of resource endowment, social inequality in the region is ubiquitous, poverty still exists and many commitments to human rights remain aspirational (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat 2013). Aside from the statistics, this reality is captured in the ways in which people move around the region – sometimes voluntarily, sometimes forced, but always in search of ways to improve their lives. Increasingly places called home

---

[1] NZADDs Commentaries provide commentary from the perspective of the author, contributing to discussion and analysis of NZ aid and development work. NZADDs Commentaries do not necessarily represent an official NZADDs stance on any issue. Commentaries and other NZADDs papers can be read online at: http://nzadds.org.nz/publications/.

[2] Associate Professor Underhill-Sem is the Director of the Development Studies Programme in the School of Social Sciences at the University of Auckland. She can be contacted via: http://www.arts.auckland.ac.nz/people/yund001

are impoverished through the lack of investment in basic social services, environments are degraded by unsustainable resource extraction, which is compounded by gradual or episodic climatic events, and social relations are strained leading to violent and sometimes barbaric human behaviour. Everyone suffers, but some suffer more than others – especially women, young people, children and people with physical and mental disabilities. Further, these inequalities are compounded so if you suffer from one, you suffer from another one. This results in what has been rightfully called intersectional inequalities (Kabeer 2010), which results in multi-dimensional poverty and which therefore calls for intersectional responses.

Mobility: a key driver of intensifying inequalities

To address these intersectional inequalities, it is important to more fully grasp the nuances of population dynamics in the Pacific (Haberkorn 2010). A woman's control over her own fertility is one of the most fundamental aspects of human development that still however remains evasive. For too many women, various religious and social reasons stand in the way of their right to control their fertility. And for far too many, this leads to premature death with the consequential hardship and threats to human development especially for the children she leaves behind. Nothing less than a full commitment to sexual and reproductive health and rights will address this disregard for women's human rights (UNFPA 2014).

Another critical population dynamic contributing to the development trajectory of the region is that of mobility. This is increasingly diverse combining longstanding patterns of movement between resource poor countries in the central and eastern Pacific and metropolitan neighbours, intensifying urbanisation in main towns and increasingly in metropolitan centres, and emerging new patterns of inter-regional mobility (Haberkorn 2008).

The implications of these patterns are many and varied: remittances between multi-local households across the region; too few young people in some places and too many in others, increasing risk of the transmission of poor health, and so on. While the desire and motivation to move may still rest with individuals, the development of economic practices that can generate and redistribute wealth rests with often unfavourable terms of trade in small island states as well as with duty bearers whose lack of attention to equitable redistribution is regrettable.

Urbanisation patterns include intensifying patterns of movement of people and produce from more rural to more urban areas in larger resource rich countries of the western Pacific; the resource curse which sees impoverishment in the face of resource riches and a reconfiguration rural-urban flows of people; the growing importance of port cities for services, as entry and exit points; and crowded cities and towns which create conflicts over resources like housing and employment (Connell 2011).

Emerging mobility patterns include the mobility of nurses and soldiers out of the region; inter-regional mobility of education professionals (PNG teachers in Nauru); inter-regional mobility of poorly educated care workers (Fijians in Cook Islands); the trafficking of women (in Fiji and PNG); climate induced migration; new seasonal labour mobility schemes; and the growth of large populations of Pacific people living in New Zealand and Australia (Stahl 2007).

The new locations and the range in duration of residence mean we have new kinds of citizens emerging and, with this, new responsibilities for duty bearers.

Youthful: a key example of intersecting inequalities

And many of these new citizens are youthful. To fully grasp the implications of this, it is important to better understand how both youth and women are affected differently. This provides an opportunity to better understand intersecting inequalities. While young people need a voice in how development unfolds, like all women regardless of age, they also need their sexual and reproductive health and rights recognised, in addition to their right to education, as well as to other basic services like housing and justice (Curtain and Vakaoti 2010).

In providing a voice for youth, new forms of citizenship emerge and with this the recognition of the responsibilities of duty bearers. Tapping this democratic potential allows for the creative potential of young people and their social capital to flourish. Ignoring this, is rightfully of huge concern.

This is especially so because the other concerns of marginalised young people – girls and young women; those with disabilities, those of diverse sexualities – also require attention. One key avenue to ensure the diverse needs of these diverse groups of young people are met is to pay attention to their sexual and reproductive health and rights. Not only does it ensure young people remain healthy, informed and safe but it also provides a compelling basis for understanding bodily integrity and therefore respectful citizenship.

Decent jobs and diverse economies are needed to address the shortage of basic social services (shelter, education, health, water and justice). One area that I think is worth exploring for young people are the creative industries – in the broadest sense - which have potential for absorbing more youthful desires. These strategies also require basic but high quality and reliable education and health systems for all.

Gender Inequality: a key reason for addressing intersecting inequalities
The clearest way to understand intersecting inequalities is to be vigilant about addressing gender inequality. The incredible powerlessness that envelopes women subject to physical and emotional violence, is deadening. Violent patriarchal practices exist in both formal and informal institutions and this ensures a patriarchal privilege prevails. As a result we have gender based violence, low rates of women's political representation, and the abrogation of women's human rights. Meanwhile women continue to secure their livelihoods and those of their families and communities through diverse economic practices. These diverse economic practices enable them to maintain flexible livelihoods and these should be allowed to flourish. Empowered women will enable community based economies to be scaled up.

Gender based violence cuts through the ability of women to exercise any of their human rights. Its pervasiveness means that sadly impunity reigns. Multiple sites of engagement are needed from care and protection of victims to ensuring justice and then educating for peaceful and respectful relationships

Women's representation in public arenas is low with too few women in strategic decision-making places so special temporary measures are a critical step forward. More consideration needs to be given to women's engagement at local body and other levels of governance.

Conclusion

Social inequality in the Pacific represents the continuation of longstanding structural issues in SIDS. New sustainable development goals must be bolder because new political power bases and new forms of making a living, legal and illegal, will accompany the dynamic processes of contemporary demographic change.

A human rights approach to development is not a Western imposition when it promotes the aspirational goals of equality. It also allows for new kinds of citizens - younger ones, women, people with disabilities, people of mixed heritage – and with this comes new calls on duty bearers to do their duty.

The SIDSs of the Pacific need to take these challenges seriously. They need to speak with one voice for bold new sustainable development trajectories that take what we have learnt from the MDGs and go further. This means inclusive citizenship with young people and all of civil society and clear demands that all duty bearers at international, regional, national and local levels, attend to their duties.

In this way we can reduce inequalities between individuals, groups and countries. We can then begin to attend to the intersecting inequalities – social, economic and political – because it is clear that these intersecting inequalities contribute to the multi-dimensional poverty that cannot become an engrained feature of SIDSs.

References

Alkire, S., & Santos, M. E. (2014). Measuring acute poverty in the developing world: Robustness and scope of the multidimensional poverty index. World Development, 59, 251-274.

Connell, J. (2011). Elephants in the Pacific? Pacific urbanisation and its discontents. Asia Pacific Viewpoint, 52(2), 121-135

Curtain, R., & Vakaoti, P. (2011). The state of Pacific youth, 2011. Suva, Fiji: UNICEF: Secretariat of the Pacific Community.

Dili International Conference. (2013). 'Key conclusions from the Round Table of Pacific Issues'. Outcome statement of the International Conference on the Post-2015 Development Agenda: Development for all: Stop conflict, build states and eradicate poverty'.

Gillett, R. (2011). Fisheries of the Pacific Islands: Regional and national information. FAO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, Bangkok, Thailand. RAP Publication 2011/03, 279 pages.

Haberkorn, G. (2008). Pacific Islands' population and development: facts, fictions and follies. New Zealand Population Review, 33(34), 95-127.

Kabeer, N. (2010). Can the MDGs provide a pathway to social justice? The challenge of intersecting inequalities. Child poverty and inequality new perspectives, 57.

Morris, M. (2011). Measuring poverty in the Pacific. Development Policy Centre Discussion Paper, (9).

Pacific Island Forum Secretariat. (2013). Pacific Regional MDGs Tracking Report, Suva, Fiji

Stahl, C. W., & Appleyard, R. T. (2007). Migration and Development in the Pacific Islands: Lessons from the New Zealand Experience. Australian Agency for International Development.

UNFPA, 2014, Population and Development Profiles: Pacific Island Countries, Suva, Fiji.