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Cairo+10: Recent Pacific island population developments, and upcoming challenges

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Abstract

Some 11 years ago, introducing the Pacific Islands regional report to the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, Secretariat of the Pacific Community's then Secretary-General underlined that population issues have always been at the very heart of balanced and sustainable development throughout the Pacific region. Despite differences in culture, geographies, resource endowment and levels of development, he pointed to many similarities, some of which are shared with other island regions in the world: a vulnerability to natural disasters and sea-level rise, a very narrow resources base coupled with small domestic markets and long distances to international markets, a high dependence on overseas development assistance and highly complex systems of social and economic relationships. Set against this backdrop of bio-physical and economic challenges, he continued, Governments throughout the region recognise the crucial role of population in the development process, acknowledging an emerging major population challenge confronting the region being its growing and youthful population in search of employment, while putting pressure on infrastructure and the provision of services.

This concern with broad population and development issues relative to other population also transpired quite explicitly from Pacific island countries' own national policy statements, development policy and planning documentation, and interventions made at various regional and international fora in the lead-up to Cairo, and in Cairo itself (Haberkorn 1995). Thirteen of the 14 Pacific island countries which sent official delegations to Cairo had little difficulty in identifying their concerns, referring to over 200 population and development issues they wished to address in their own countries. While most countries had something to say about most ICPD policy themes, two policy areas attracted more attention than most others: "the interrelationship between population, sustained economic growth and sustainable development, and the area of reproductive rights and reproductive health"².

¹ The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Secretariat of the Pacific Community, Noumea, New Caledonia.

² See Haberkorn, 1995, for a more detailed account on this assessment.

Given the practical impossibility in terms of domestic resources and national capacity for most Pacific island countries to effectively pursue more than two or three key population policy initiatives at any one time – since most population-related activities in the early 1990s were largely donor-funded, and often “under the overall management of single government official, euphemistically called the ‘population focal point’ –, a second assessment was made of countries’ top policy priorities. All countries represented at Cairo were requested to again review their own priorities, and identify those issue they felt required immediate attention (Group 1 priorities), and those they considered important in the long-run (Group 2), and then pick their top 3 population and development priorities from their Group 1 priorities. As a result, two issues became crystal clear. While

- a concern with population/development/environment interactions emerged as a top priority for seven countries, closely followed by high population growth³, health-related issues, and the perception of the need to intensify efforts to develop national policies and improve domestic HR capacities,
- reproductive rights and health did not make the top three policy priority in any Pacific island country, and neither did “empowerment of women” or Population IEC, despite featuring strongly in most official documents and statements.

This paper discusses the current population situation in the Pacific region at the time of Cairo, population and development priorities after ICPD 1994, as well as challenges ahead.

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³ And in the case of Niue, with persistent high population decline, due to emigration, which sees about ten times more Niueans living in New Zealand than on Niue.