▌ Article ▌

Rising Urban Stars: A Story of Spontaneous Settlements Ashnita Singh and Mohammed Iftikar Khan

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Abstract

The proliferation of squatters is an unavoidable urban feature. Illegal settlements of underserved urbanites, known in the literature as shanty towns, mushroom slums, and marginal or "spontaneous" settlements and areas, narrate a distinctive story of urban landscapes. Squatters materialize under varying circumstances, among which is the premise of rapid urbanization. Thus, urbanization in the Pacific is a defining characteristic of resource deprivation. Pacific Island Countries, including Fiji, continue to urbanize, leading to squatting trends. The prospect of such continuations makes urban boroughs vulnerable spaces, given it strengthens the probability of a squatter boom and the deprivation-squatter cycle.

▌ *Keywords* : deprivation, urbanization, squatter, self-help, Progressive Development School

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Introduction

The switch from rural residency to urban areas is a hallmark of urbanization. Pacific urbanization is a cross-sector issue that poses pronounced changes to demographic patterns and urban informality (Jones, 2012). Metropoles as centers of resource deprivation, are transforming the duet of shelter and affordability. Consequently, disadvantaged blocs in overcrowded urban areas face the repercussions of housing chaos (Kiddle, 2011).

According to Wade (2018), deprived or underserved communities in urban spaces have been denied the "success ladder" (not having economic success, leading to various disparities including affordable housing). Urbanization has transmuted the socioeconomic fabric of societies, as has the trend of affordable shelters and the prospect of shanty towns. According to Kiddle (2011), overcrowded and unhygienic squatter setups are more *life-threatening* than urban living.

Slums refer to dwellings that contravene laws and regulations. These are "spontaneous" communities or clusters of families that gradually settle on properties, sites, or areas of land without consent (Jones, 2012). UN-HABITAT (2005) describes squatting as people residing under the same roof in urban zones without appropriate guards against climatic conditions, adequate living space, access to usable drinking water, reasonable cleanliness standards, or legalized land tenure (the notion of slums of despair). Such residential constituencies are generated by illegal land occupation and the resultant construction bypassing building regulations (contrary to formalized or regulated housing).

More often, the practice involves the premeditated incursion of vacant land where proprietorship seems vague, and intrusion is unlikely to cause an alarm. Therefore, the advent of resource deprivation caused by rapid urbanization is fast-tuning urban strugglers to look for spots where illegal housing erections can emerge with the least number of complications. As Johnston et al. (2000) and Clark (2003) reinforce, such construction is initiated on urban fringes, valleys, dumpsites, and viaducts. Accordingly,

such structures are safety hazards, considering the squatter issue beyond the binary of shelter and deprivation. The next part briefly explains the theoretical framework of this study.

Theoretical Lensing

Various theoretical lenses have covered urbanization of poverty and squatters. The Dependency School (DS) considers squatting, although not exclusive to, the effect of rapid urbanization in developing economies (Cardoso and Faletto, 2024). A Progressive Development School (PDS) (or Progressive Housing) pins urbanization and squatting on inadequate housing programs (Walsh, 1978; Malaque, Bartsch and Scriver, 2018). DS attaches issues of squatters to factors of urbanization, colonialism (exploitation of weaker nations by dominant economies), and global capitalism (economic systems championing private ownership and profiting markets affecting unequal wealth distribution and deprivation) (Cardoso and Faletto, 2024; Peet, 2024; Rantissi and Gitis, 2024).

Conversely, PDS picks on inadequate shelter-related programs and state action in response to issues of urbanization while associating squatting with insufficient policies around affordable shelters. The latter also advocates *self-help* grounded in policies (used here to imply policy interventions toward affordable shelter provision) to address housing-related demand and supply gaps. Although references have been made to the role of NGOs in the squatting impasse during discussions, *self-help* in this article revolves around state-guided policy directives in mediating squatting issues.

Therefore, this article draws on PDS's *self-help* (shelter policies) approach to resolve the dilemmas of urban squatting. It is deemed a more suitable lens because, at its core, it encapsulates practical interventions, such as shelter-related policy improvements, making it more relatable to these concerns. As the key arguments of this article are around deciphering urban squatting issues, the PDS's shelter-connected policy dynamics blend harmoniously with the motive and are chosen for relevant

discourse. The next section covers the concepts of urbanization, deprivation, and squatting in Pacific Island Countries (PICs).

Urbanization, Deprivation, and Squatting Nexus in PICs

Urbanization and Poverty

At a broader level, the urbanization of poverty has been a long-standing subject in PICs. The widening urbanization of poverty in Pacific towns and cities is visibly evident at present. Many PICs have urban populations below the basic needs poverty line (BNPL) compared with rural populations, while the proportional distribution of those living below the poverty line is higher in the urban Pacific (Connell and Lea, 2002; Jones, 2012).

Notably, over 60% of people lived in Tongatapu (Tonga) and the Majuro and Ebeye islands (Marshall Islands), around 50% of Cook Islanders lived in Raratonga, over 40% of Tuvaluans resided in Funafuti, and over 30% of Kiribati residents lived in South Tarawa (SPC, 1994), echo the stresses of urbanization. Little over 7% (2019) of the Marshall Islanders (Asian Development Bank (ADB), 2024a) and almost 22% (2019) of the Kiribati population lived below the BNPL (ADB, 2024b). Based on the national cost of BNPL (2019−2020), the hardship rate for Vanuatu was estimated at roughly 16%, with approximately 47,000 individuals living in hardship countrywide (Vanuatu National Statistics Office (VNSO), 2021).

For Tonga, as per the Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) (2021), 24% of the population was identified as poor and 15% under vulnerable deprivation (Government of Tonga, 2020), with a forecasted rise from 24,000 to 25,000 people between 2020 and 2023 and projections of an annual urban population surge (GlobalData Place, 2025). Amid widening deprivation, the Pacific region is rapidly urbanizing, with an average annual urbanization rate of 3%, posing potential concerns for affordable housing (World Bank, 2024a).

Deprivation and Squatting

When we examine the matter of one in four Pacific Islanders being a resident in urban areas (Jones, 2012), we understand what this means for housing needs. Population density puts extreme pressure on urban facilities, with underserved (urban) communities having fewer resources to address their shelter needs. Consequently, many vie for substandard housing, where deprivation and illegal shelter act as two sides of the same coin.

Factoring in the influx of the urban population augmented by the squatting saga, this parable is becoming more catatonic than ever in PICs. Retaining populations within rural boundaries remains challenging because of disparities in rural and urban services and facilities. This may imply that as residents continue influxing in urban centers, the population bulge feeds into urban poverty and vice versa.

As noted by the SPC (2001), French Polynesia's swelling urban population signifies an increasing per capita cost of delivering basic services among the issues of urban squatting. Moreover, 35% of the population of Honiara (Solomon Islands) and 45% of the population of Port Moresby (Papua New Guinea) (PNG) settled in informal settlements (2008) (ibid.).

Moreover, the largest numbers of squatters are in Melanesian capital cities: Port Moresby (PNG), Honiara (Solomon Islands), Port Vila (Vanuatu), and parts of Micronesia—South Tarawa (Kiribati) and Majuro (Marshall Islands) (Sanderson and Jones, 2017). Most urban spots in the Pacific endure squatter settlements to varying degrees, with Port Moresby having 45−50% of its population residing in squatters (ibid.).

Countries in the Pacific have been exploring ways to improve their shelter situations through land reforms and NGO interventions that initiate self-building, repair, and shelter maintenance programs (Juswanto and Kelkar, 2019). Land tenure reforms in PICs continue to be challenged by issues of land ownership, urbanization, shelter, and policy reforms (ibid.).

Fewer alternatives and the stresses of shelter unaffordability take

a toll on PICs (Narsey et al., 2009). Urban squatting may lead to the sale of land to "potential bidders" hoping for illegal residency (Jones, 2012). While this offers short-term relief, it creates room for informal land dealings with repercussions for various parties in the mid to long run. Now, we focus on Fiji's context.

Deprivation, Squatting, and Actor Intervention in Fiji

Fiji in the Pacific is not exclusive to deprivation and squatting cycles. For instance, poverty surged from approximately 25% (1990) to 40% (2008) (Ministry of National Planning, 2010). At one point, Fiji was likened to deep inequalities (1997 Fiji Poverty Report), with 25% of Fijian households living in poverty and unable to sustain basic living requirements (MDG, 2004). The poverty rate decreased from 26% (2002−2003) to 21% (2008−2009) and increased to over 22% in 2013−2014 (FBoS, 2015). The national cost-of-basic-needs poverty rate was approximately 24% (2019−2020), with poverty rates reaching approximately 52% (2023) (World Bank, 2020, 2024b) and almost 30% (2024) in Fiji (Radio New Zealand (RNZ) Pacific, 2024).

Therefore, poverty was a decisive factor in Fiji's squatting trends. Although a dated reference, "every eighth person in Suva (Fiji) being a squatter" and 23 squatter communities (note figures valid for its year of reference) (Leonard and Pat, 1987) help establish the gravity of deprivation and squatting trends in earlier times.

Some of the largest squatter clusters are found in Suva (Fiji) (Sanderson and Jones, 2017). Rapid urbanization in Suva has resulted in poverty and squatters (Phillips and Meg, 2016). In 2017, approximately 24% of the Fijians lived in squatter settlements (International Organization for Migration (IOM), 2020), whereas in 2020, 9% of the urban population (Fiji) were identified as slum dwellers (UN-HABITAT, 2025). Chand (2022) notes that urbanization increased economic disparities that ballooned Fiji's squatting environment. According to Presterudstuen (2024), squatters comprise roughly 20% of the total population, denoting the need

for social justice, while RNZ Pacific (2024) mentions that approximately 200,000 Fijians are squatter residents.

Fiji's squatting trend signifies that the state and other agencies are at the helm of it (Habib, 2009). For example, the Fijian government has worked toward securing tenure for illegal settlements as a solution to the shelter dilemma (Ministry of Housing and Community Development, 2018). Efforts involved aiding informal settlements through proper tenancy agreements and informal settlement relocation programs (Fiji) (ibid.). Regularizing informal settlements into formal communities by facilitating the basic infrastructure and security of land tenure was pipelined for areas such as Omkar (Nasinu), Ledrusasa (Nadi), Cuvu (Sigatoka), Caubati (Nasinu), Sasawira (Nasinu), Clopcott Settlement (Ba), and Namaka (Nadi) in the county (ibid.).

Increase in budget provisions (FJ$17.2 million: 2018–2019) to the Housing Authority and Public Rental Board with recent provisions (FJ$3.5 million: 2024–2025 Budget) toward the formalization of five informal settlements (Ministry of Housing and Community Development 2018; RNZ Pacific, 2024) shows the state's efforts toward squatting concerns. In 2024, proposals on shelter-related policy actions, including fast-tracking land renewal leases, providing 99-year leases to informal dwellers, and running audits on infrastructural projects in settlements with the Fijian government's 12-year plan to formalize informal settlements (RNZ Pacific, 2024), were a mark of state intervention with practical shelter needs through the PDS theoretical lens.

The contribution of civil society, similar to that of state actors, is vital to this journey. NGOs such as Habitat for Humanity, International Red Cross, Fiji Red Cross, New Zealand Aid, and AusAid assisted the Fijian government with the rehabilitation (e.g., post-cyclone) of squatter communities (Government of Fiji, 2013). In Fiji, the Housing and Squatter Resettlement Unit partners with NGOs such as the Ecumenical Centre for Research, Education and Advocacy and Habitat for Humanity to build and repair squatter housing (Juswanto and Kelkar, 2019).

More specifically, over 300 Fijian families living in informal settle-

ments in Nabua (Suva) were assisted by a religious NGO (Fiji Muslim League) (Ministry of Housing and Community Development, 2018) (information valid for its year of reference, as governance policies and agendas around squatting and occupiers often shift). Such social responsibility initiatives contribute to underserved communities. Charitable platforms, such as Oxfam and Fiji's Habitat for Humanity, mention that state actors must better assist deprived Fijians (ABC Pacific, 2024). The next section extends the concept of *self-help* in the context of Fiji.

Extending Theory and Conception

As mentioned earlier, this article proceeds with the theoretical lens of PDS, underpinning primarily shelter policies, and combines Walsh's (1978) concept of *self-help*, which mentions that housing policies addressing squatting issues started receiving far more attention in the Fijian context around the said period (1978). Walsh breaks his proposition to shelter policies around unregulated housing (compared to formalized housing requirements). Informal shelter-related policies for urban strugglers in Fiji have foregrounded core arguments. However, the authors slightly expand the concept of *self-help* (as suggested in the following discussion) as an extension of Walsh's proposition.

Policy Development

Shelter-related policies begin with a review of the requirements for urban squatters. This involves examining the population size in different squatting areas, the conditions of informal housing structures, and access to existing (basic) amenities. Specific legal frameworks that regularize land tenure or land-sharing contracts must engage squatter occupiers, landowners, and agencies such as state players (and NGOs) to ensure that housing policy rollouts are practical. Such efforts without dialogue with relevant landholding units may not materialize, as securing tenure is the basis for such rollouts. Monetary support from the state and partner-

ing with public and private (and NGO) agencies will be vital to this endeavor.

Policy Rollout

Targeted squatter areas based on the operating budgets of relevant actors (and support groups) can run as model or preliminary projects, focusing on improvements and lessons learned from previous projects. The rollout will (as per the budget) incorporate access to water, sanitation, and electricity, supported by stable (as opposed to weak structures for which squatters are known) housing construction. Moreover, enabling grassroots participation is crucial in these rollouts, and periodic monitoring by parties (such as monthly checks on participants and volunteers in gauging progress of targeted goals) involved in assessing progress and amending requirements (if needed). Contrary to Walsh, an added proposal is the "pre-hazard monitoring" of squatter structures, which must be part of policy and monitoring programs during this piloting phase.

Expected Outcomes

The anticipated result of the aforementioned rollout is the improvement in squatter occupiers' living conditions, amenities, and tenure security. This will also add to the magnitude of social inclusion, curbing the gulf between regularized and unregularized settlements. In the long run, shelter-related policy dynamics could empower development and generate government revenue through squatter-shelter formalization, which can be reinvested in other developmental efforts. Such actions are expected to transform urban squatters into potential places of hope (slums of hope), relative to their connotations of urban despair.

Conclusion

Squatters as rising "urban stars" are a dominant urban narrative. There appears to be a profound connection between deprivation and its

squatter counterpart, with numerous studies endorsing this urban parody. Mushrooming illegal dwellings, an indicator of unaffordable housing, raises the question of whether urban squatters hold the premise of slums of hope or despair. Squatting is a short-term solution (slums of hope), but it has pertinent consequences (slums of despair). Various initiatives by the state (and other actors) have been undertaken to aid in the deprivation-squatter impasse. Therefore, targeted shelter policies, as argued through the PDS lens, with reference to Walsh's *self-help* approach, could offer practical and sustainable housing solutions for urban occupancy.

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