

THE DEMOGRAPHIC SITUATION IN THE PACIFIC ISLANDS

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## INTRODUCTION

The 22 island countries and territories discussed in this report are located within a wide band of the South Pacific ocean stretching from approximately 130 degrees east longitude to 130 degrees west longitude, and from latitude 20 degrees north to about 25 degrees south (Figure 1). This area corresponds to what can be termed the "developing" Pacific and thus excludes the relatively industrialized Pacific countries of Australia and New Zealand as well as the state of Hawaii. Some smaller Pacific islands which are formally part of metropolitan countries, such as Norfolk Island (Australia) and Easter Island (Chile), are excluded; but the tiny island of Pitcairn (administered by Great Britain) is included because its population is mainly Polynesian and it shares a number of features with other developing Pacific islands. On both geographical and cultural grounds, the territory of Irian Jaya, the western half of the island of New Guinea, is part of Melanesia, and therefore should be included in the region; but since it is now part of Indonesia it has been excluded. Similarly, the Torres Straits islands, also part of the Melanesia culture area, are not discussed because they are administered as part of Australia.

Although the region comprises only about 20 percent of the entire Pacific Ocean area, by any other standard it is vast. Based on the 200 mile exclusive economic zone concept, the countries and dependent territories of the developing South Pacific have jurisdiction over approximately 29 million square kilometers of ocean. Relative to this immense sea area, however, the land area of the

region is extremely small, totalling only about 551,000 square kilometers or approximately 1.5 percent of the total sea area. The exact number of islands in the region cannot be determined exactly, but estimates of up to 7,500 (not counting the individual islets of complex atolls) have been made (Bryan, 1965). Of these, however, probably fewer than 500 are presently inhabited (Nicholson, 1969). In terms of land area the region is overwhelmingly dominated by Papua New Guinea, whose 462,000 square kilometers accounts for 84 percent of the total land area. At the other end of the scale is miniscule Pitcairn Island with only 5 square kilometers.

The Pacific Islands can be divided into three broad culture areas: Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia (Figure 1). At certain points the boundary between these areas is indistinct. Fiji, for example, is normally considered part of Melanesia<sup>1</sup>, yet it shares many cultural features with Tonga and Samoa, its Polynesian neighbors. Similarly, the atolls of Tikopia, Ontong Java, Renell and Bellona, which lie within the geographical boundaries of Melanesia, and Kapingamarangi, which is located within Micronesia, are populated by Polynesians who migrated westward from central Polynesia. Colonial and post-colonial migrations have also resulted in ethnic dispersion throughout the Pacific Islands. Thus a considerable Polynesian population—originating in the Wallis and Futuna islands and French Polynesia—has settled in New Caledonia. Immigration from outside the Pacific has also contributed to cultural diversity as Indians, Chinese, Indo-Chinese and Europeans have settled in the larger islands of Fiji, Tahiti and New Caledonia. Labor migration from the Philippines has also produced a changing ethnic profile in the Northern Mariana Islands of Micronesia.

These qualifications aside, however, there is sufficient internal similarity within these three culture areas that they provide a useful basis for comparative demographic and socio-economic analysis. The existence of ecological variation both within and between these culture areas has also made the Pacific islands an excellent ethnographic laboratory (Sahlins, 1957). The potential for comparative demographic analysis remains considerable (Pirie, 1976).

The forms of political organization in the developing Pacific exhibit considerable diversity. With the exception of New Caledonia, which remains an Overseas Territory of France, all the countries of Melanesia are independent sovereign states. In Micronesia, only Kiribati and Nauru are independent: Guam is a Territory and the Northern Mariana Islands a Commonwealth of the United States, while the Federated States of Micronesia, Marshall Islands and Palau are in the process of becoming self-governing entities in "free-association" with the United States.

In Polynesia, only Tonga, Tuvalu and Western Samoa are sovereign states. French Polynesia and Wallis and Futuna are Overseas Territories of France with limited powers of self-government. New Zealand has direct administrative authority over the Tokelau Islands and maintains a relationship of "free association" with Niue and the Cook Islands. American Samoa is an Unincorporated Territory of the United States but with some powers of self-government.

The economies of the region are also highly diverse. While it is difficult to obtain reliable income statistics for the Pacific islands as a whole, the data in Table 1 and elsewhere (SPC 1981) suggest that per capita income was in the range \$1400-1600 around 1980. Using the

World Bank system of international economic classification (World Bank, 1983), this level of income would place the developing Pacific at the high end of the "lower middle-income" group of developing countries. But the range of per capita incomes in the Pacific is extremely wide. New Caledonia, Guam and French Polynesia all have percapita incomes approaching those of the industrialized Pacific countries of Australia and New Zealand, and this has a considerable impact on the average income levels of the Pacific as a whole. If the high income countries are excluded, per capita incomes in the remainder of the Pacific would probably be around \$1,000.

*para* Only one Pacific developing country, Western Samoa, is considered by the OECD to be among the "least developed" countries of the world, but as Table 1 indicates, several Pacific countries (Vanuatu, Kiribati, Tonga and Tuvalu) actually have lower per capita incomes than Samoa.

The determinants of income levels and economic structures are complex, but it is clear that high per capita incomes are mainly a function of economies based on mineral extraction (New Caledonia, Nauru) or military expenditures (Guam, French Polynesia). In each of these territories, however, a substantial minority of the population is of European rather than indigenous origin, and this has important implications for income distribution. The low income countries are primarily those independent states which have severed formal ties with metropolitan powers and/or whose natural resources are either extremely limited (Kiribati) or as yet undeveloped (Vanuatu). Most of the middle-income Pacific countries are only able to achieve their present level of living because of substantial inflows of Official Development Assistance (ODA), often from countries with which some political-legal ties remain (New Zealand, United States).

## POPULATION ISSUES IN THE PACIFIC ISLANDS

The study of Pacific Islands populations presents a number of theoretical and methodological challenges (Taeuber, 1965). The predominant theoretical approach to population change over the past several decades is the theory of "demographic transition", first elaborated by Notenstein (1945). Transition theory is a variant of the broader "modernization" paradigm that once dominated social science research on developing societies. This model envisioned societies passing from a relatively static "traditional" state through a dynamic transitional or "intermediate" phase before coming to rest again in another relatively stable condition described as "modernity" (Eisenstadt, Parsons, etc., etc.). The unstable social, political and economic conditions characteristic of many developing countries were perceived as maladies of the transition from one mode of social integration (tradition) to another (modern). The demographic variant of this model sees "traditional" societies as characterized by high rates of mortality, a condition which necessitates equally high rates of fertility if population decline is to be averted. As "modern" medical technology diffuses to such societies, mortality declines while high "traditional" fertility continues apace. The result is rapid population growth which can only be overcome by the further diffusion of "modern" technologies of birth control and Western norms regarding ideal family size.

The conventional transition model has been criticized by Caldwell (1976, 1982) for its ethnocentrism and inability to explain the social and economic factors underlying demographic change. A

number of recent studies have also cast doubt upon the assumption of transition theory that fertility declines automatically with urbanization and economic growth (Eberstadt, 1982; Freedman, 1984).

While it is clear that twentieth century change in many Pacific island populations has followed the course predicted by transition theory, there are several respects in which the explanatory framework of transition theory gives a misleading impression of 19th century population history. Historical evidence suggests that mortality levels in parts of the South Pacific were quite low prior to contact with representatives of European cultures (Pirie, 1971, 1976; Pirie and Groenewegen, 1973). At the same time, however, little evidence has been found to indicate that Pacific islands populations ever increased to the levels that could theoretically be supported given the subsistence resources available on the larger island groups of Samoa, Tonga and Tahiti. This implies that Pacific peoples had developed cultural means by which fertility could be reduced when other checks on population growth (famine, warfare, etc.) were not operative. Ethnographic evidence from a variety of locations indicates that direct methods of population limitation ranging from infanticide to induced abortion and post-partum intercourse taboos were in operation throughout the Pacific (Bulmer, 1971; Firth, etc etc.....). A variety of cultural practices and beliefs, such as the belief that sexual intercourse has a weakening effect on males, would have had the indirect result of limiting family size.

The effects of colonization were initially to increase mortality, the degree varying quite widely across the Pacific depending on local circumstances (McArthur, 1967). In some regions

too, the introduction of syphilis had a depressing effect on fertility. These twin effects would have removed much of the incentive to apply deliberate fertility controls, and it is likely that cultural norms favoring high fertility gradually emerged, or existing ones reinforced, during the colonial era in order to ensure demographic survival. Supporting these trends was the influence of European or European-trained missionaries who viewed indigenous systems of birth limitation as immoral. In time, traditional means of fertility control became erased from cultural memory, and more broadly-based social and cultural changes undermined the less conscious practices (breast-feeding, post-partum intercourse taboo, male-female separation, late marriage, late child-bearing within marriage, etc.) which previously kept natural fertility below potential levels.

Depopulation remained the predominant theme of Pacific population studies throughout the first few decades of the twentieth century (Ward and Moran, 1959). As immunity to imported diseases increased, and public health measures were instituted by colonial administrations, mortality rates fell, sometimes dramatically. Declines occurred earliest in such Polynesian populations as American Samoa, Western Samoa and the Cook Islands, and in Fiji. Elsewhere in Melanesia, however, mortality remained at high levels until well after World War II, especially in those areas of the western Pacific affected by malaria.

... recent pop history, 1960s on...