

Urban planning in Samoa – issues for decision-making

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Introduction

The need for urban planning in Samoa had been mentioned and discussed in official circles as far back as the early 1930s. But it was in 1954 that the first sustained effort was made with the formation of a town planning committee chaired by the Director of the Works and including senior officials from Lands and Surveys, Police, Fire, Health and Treasury Departments. The general aim was to set up a physical planning system for the capital, Apia. In 1956 there were moves to establish an urban authority. An advisory committee was set up consisting of government and private sector representatives. This was reconstituted as the Apia Advisory Committee in 1958 under the Minister of Lands but a year later it had all but disappeared.

From 1964 onwards professional town planners were employed by the Public Works Department and a series of plans for Apia were produced. The last one, which included the relocation of Beach Road and the provision of a pedestrian mall on the existing road in Central Apia, was approved in 1992 but never implemented. Draft planning legislation was also prepared and submitted for government consideration in 1973, 1979 and 1983 but were rejected. Again in 1991, the setting up of an urban municipality authority was promoted but by 1995 and following a World Bank study, it was again dropped. The national government would continue to provide urban services. And in progress is an Asian Development Bank study to develop a national framework for urban planning.

This paper explores the issues related to urban planning in Samoa. Based on actual records and observations it examines local understanding of the causes and effects of urban problems as well as attitudes towards addressing them. It also looks at some of the underlying influences on urban management and comments on planning options for the future.

40 years without planning

The lack of proper planning and the haphazard nature of urban development are directly attributed to the absence of any formal planning framework. This is in spite of the fact that problems associated with the lack of planning have been well-articulated for many years in Samoa. For instance, as described by a former Public Works Department town planner, R Willcox, in 1972:

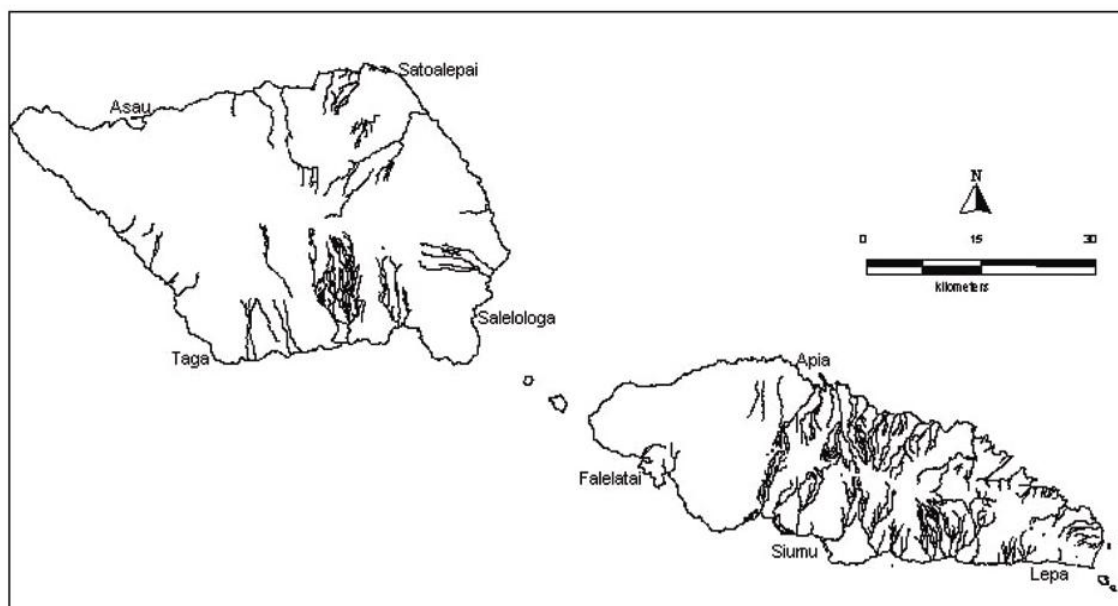
The Apia area contains many illustrations of the need for physical planning. A copra shed, with all the odours and the truck traffic that it requires is located immediately across the street from the town's market. Little provision is made anywhere for pedestrians and their movement on the streets is both dangerous to themselves and an obstruction to vehicles. Back from Beach Street, *fale* are increasingly jammed together with less and less open space around them. Inadequate access roads exist and there are few through streets to carry traffic across town without the congestion on Beach Road. Throughout the area, workshops and small factories are located next to residential, commercial and office buildings where the noise, fumes and traffic necessary to their operations is a nuisance to their neighbors

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and to the public in general. In large parts of Apia, insufficient drainage in both residential and commercial areas is a constant and ever increasing health hazard, as well as threat to the safety of the structures¹.

Twenty years later, in 1992, problems related to inadequate drainage, poor sewerage disposal and uncontrolled urban growth seemed to have worsened:

Here is a small town battling a terminal illness threatening to put her down. Filth and disease are swimming in swamps and puddles everywhere...The saddest thing of all is that nobody seems to know what to do. Where are the government's so-called thinkers, the town planners and engineers? Why hasn't anybody been able to figure out how to move the disease-ridden swamps of Fugalei and Taufusi into the sea? The truth is that Apia's growth has been advancing rapidly over the last few years, so that now it is far ahead of development...Even though it is as plain as daylight that proper drainage and sewage systems are as essential as food and water, they have been taking the lackadaisical attitude...Apia in its present state is a filthy, depressing little town, totally empty of inspiration. Its ugliness constantly defies the imagination (Samoa Observer 25/2/92).



The Samoa Islands. Source: DLSE

By 2000, there was a clear identification by stakeholders of the range of problems in the context of urban planning. In summary, urban planning issues are on the rise. The demand for public and private housing is increasing, there is no reticulated sewerage system, water systems need upgrading, unemployment and youth problems are visible, sewerage effluent pollutes rivers and the bay of Apia, roads need major maintenance and in many cases reconstruction, foreshore heritage buildings are under pressure of redevelopment, disputes for subdivision continues to escalate as boundaries and owners are unclear. In some fringe housing areas squatter settlement are emerging on customary and freehold lands. Stakeholders have also cited rising problems of hazardous waste, traffic problems, water catchment issues and solid waste disposal, all issues requiring planning in a coordinated framework².

Constraints

Although no formal planning framework currently exists³ in Samoa there is a range of planning-related functions being implemented by various government agencies, often in isolation and sometimes in conflict with one another. This ad-hoc approach has many drawbacks including poor coordination of services, duplication of responsibilities and the inefficient allocation of available resources, resulting in a situation that is 'fragmented unproductively'⁴.

The absence of a planning framework means that urban development in the Apia urban area is largely unregulated. There is no planning legislation and no planning process - the procedures in which the planning outcomes are to be achieved. The existing planning structure is largely driven by the national government although there is no one specifically responsible for planning. The few qualified government planners are unable to prepare plans as there is no system for development approval and to enforce compliance. In the meantime, planning continues in a piecemeal fashion with each sector promoting its own goals and development programmes, often making assumptions based on planning principles that do not exist.

With no local tradition for formal planning, there is limited understanding of planning principles amongst stakeholders and a perceived lack of community support. There is little if any public activism and an unwillingness by individuals to engage in open dialogue on social issues of public concern. Inertia and conservatism prevail⁵. This is mainly due to the lack of exposure by the local population to the certainty and order of urban planning - many Samoans have not experienced the conditions of a planned environment. But it is also due to the fact that planning is not a traditional Samoan activity. Some of the key planning principles seem to go against accepted cultural values or are in conflict with existing social institutions⁶. In a society where the *aiga* (extended family) connections are all too important, it is extremely difficult to reconcile the public interest against family interest. As the authority of the *fono* (village council) is paramount, it is very hard for another authority, like the government, to intervene in matters of village versus national importance. So as well as the national government and the *fono*, there is also the authority of the *mate* (holders of traditional titles) over their *aiga* and lands. The co-existence of both modern and traditional authorities is rather complex and not readily conducive to the application of conventional planning methods and concepts⁷.

This apparent lack of community support for planning is mirrored by the lack of political commitment. Without popular acceptance of planning, there is no political will to introduce the necessary changes to address the underlying root causes of urban problems. While planning 'is a highly political process which requires the support of politicians to get anything done'⁸, 'the articulation of problems in terms of planning needs is a sophisticated response demanding a high level of education and experience of other places'⁹. Many local politicians are unfamiliar with the complexities of planning and therefore unable to fully understand the impact of development activities on the urban environment.

The other influences on attitudes to urban planning are cultural in nature and reflect the very essence of people living on a small island state. For instance, the 'prevailing socio-political context of insularism reinforced by geographic remoteness gives rise to a slow pace of administration and lack of democratic innovation'¹⁰. Similarly, the inertia that conspires to stop things getting done is prevalent in the local bureaucracy, largely driven by job insecurity and the need by the incumbents to consolidate their power bases. The personal and partisan

politics coupled with limited employment opportunities can generate 'insecurity, policy caution and poor institutional memory'¹¹, which may lead to inactivity for fear of reprisal, or rash action in return for favours or personal gain. Strong respect for authority, while the cornerstone of Samoan society, can also lead to less democratic practice and the exclusion of the lowly ranked from consultation and decision-making. And intense 'face to face personalism and close family kinship can reduce opportunities for objective decision-making'¹², inhibit the tackling of issues and reinforce the status quo'¹³.

Challenges

So why the need for planning and why should Samoans care about it? Generally planning involves the encouragement, guidance and where necessary the control of development so that resources are used to their best advantage and in such a way as to maintain environmental integrity for future generations. Where the public interest is at stake, planning provides the mechanisms for the national government to intervene in order to safeguard community standards and maintain national order.

In the last decade, there has been growing public concern about the need for proper planning so that the adverse impacts of development are minimised. More attention was focused on the problems associated with the lack of planning and the solutions to address them. A town council, for instance, was suggested in the local press to facilitate urban development:

But seriously consider how to get rid of the ugliness in town and keep it away permanently. Perhaps a Town Council, as some concerned people have suggested, is the answer to the problem. Such a body could be established independently of the government, but allocated funds under the government's annual budget. As the Town Council grows and becomes more confident of itself, it should then be able to embark upon money-earning projects to assist it financially. Companies could be asked to fund projects aimed at lifting the place's image up, or provide materials to enable these projects to be carried out. Also, such rates as motor vehicles fees and driver license costs paid by residents of Apia and its suburbs could be directed to the Town Council. The Town Council could organise work groups to assist in drainage work, sidewalk resurfacing, lawn mowing, gardening, trash collecting and so forth, drawing on the community's unlimited volunteer workforce. This should reduce loitering around town by many young people who will now find life more meaningful, and feeling useful at the same time for being able to make a contribution to the community (Samoa Observer 15/3/1991).

And a letter to the editor of the same newspaper justified the need for urban action on moral grounds and raised the need to set housing standards and provide financial incentives to improve dwellings:

Your editorial of last Wednesday (March 11, 1992 Fugalei swamps and dead baby) was thought provoking and heart rending in the thought of an innocent human baby floating in the filthy swamps and being eaten by pigs. We pride ourselves as the paradise of the South Pacific and a God fearing country that attends church twice a Sunday all in white as snow clothing and look what we have done to the babies – eaten by the pigs – bahhh!!! I say 'we' because this is a crime created by society and a government which does not care about the welfare of its people, a government which turns a blind eye to this eye-sore slum right in the middle of Apia city. If the government has cared about the welfare of these people who live in these slums it would have passed legislation years ago on the standards of dwellings that should be built; improve drainage; created an Apia City Council which should draw its representatives from the Apia City Community...Once we have an Apia City Council, then we have a body which should be empowered to visit dwellings within their own small

village suggesting improvements and instigating fund raising projects with government support which should provide 50 per cent in *tala-for-tala* system of incentive to help these slum dwellers' (letter to the editor from 'Apia slum dweller' Samoa Observer 18/03/1992).

At a World Bank seminar for Pacific Islands on transport and the urban environment a paper by the Public Works Department highlighted some of the difficulties associated with the provision of urban services like water, surface drainage and sewerage disposal:

The newly constructed Apia Water Supply Project has provided Apia with portable treated water. Due to the excessive use of water, untreated water has been put back into the system to meet the demand. The sewerage system in Apia is septic tank and cesspit. Problems in low lying areas of Apia could result in our newly constructed surface water drainage project being ineffective. There is high priority to introduce a centralised sewerage system for Apia and the Surface Water Drainage Project should also be extended to other low lying areas of Apia. To solve the problem, disposal trucks are provided by individual business people, however they are not being used very often and the cost is expensive. There is a need to drain often. Our newly established Building Code requirement is the provision of septic tank to the new construction building in the Apia area. However, due to the lack of town planning legislation, there is little control on provision of cesspit toilet construction on low lying areas and also on customary land¹⁴.

The absence of an institutional planning structure was again identified as the main cause of urban problems:

The chief problems...are the physical difficulties associated with poor drainage and periodic cyclone destruction, the presence of large areas of uncontrolled customary land in the urban area, weak and disorganised institutional management and lack of legislative powers, and a weak fiscal base from which to initiate infrastructure improvements...Water supply problems, rubbish and waste disposal are prominent causes of complaints among Apia residents who are very much aware of the need to upgrade services to modern and reliable standards¹⁵.

In a 1998 survey of households at Sapulu village, Salelologa, Savaii, the results showed clear community understanding of some of the planning issues related to the proposed Salelologa township, particularly the concept of sustainable development. When asked about the importance of protecting the environment in the development of the new town, 20 per cent said it was 'very important' but 70 per cent agreed that it was 'important but it should not hold up development'. As the proposed site for the new town included some of the few remaining coastal forests in Samoa, unique for the conservation of plant and bird biodiversity, 17 per cent indicated it was 'very important' while 73 per cent said it was 'important but it should not hold up development'. Similar responses were obtained when asked about the protection of the sea, beaches and adjoining coastal areas. The establishment of a landfill for solid waste disposal, either in part of the land for the town or at other government land nearby was supported by 90 per cent of respondents.

By 2000, it appeared that there was increased demand to address a range of urban problems and to improve the effectiveness of public services. The challenge for planners and decision makers is to translate existing stakeholder sentiments to a popular agenda for change and to establish a planning process to facilitate such:

With the pressures of urban development increasing it is timely for the community and Government to articulate a vision for a planning framework for Apia (and its potential applicability to other urban and rural areas). Where customary lands were once not

available for development, there is an increasing acceptance by village communities of the need to review options for development. All the stakeholders indicated a growing appreciation at the local level in Apia of the need for a planning process including a co-ordination mechanism which would respect the culture, traditions and values of the Samoan society. As such the process must involve the village councils and other stakeholders at its earliest stage¹⁶.

Conclusion

While the urban situation in Apia has been debated and studied for many years there is still a considerable gap between talking and action. For the future, the focus must lie in community acceptance of the need for change and creating public awareness of the benefits of urban planning. A prerequisite for stakeholders' support of an urban planning regime is that they must fully understand the meaning and application of urban planning principles as well as the respective obligations and responsibilities of all concerned. This will require wide stakeholder participation in the planning process, avoiding non-participatory and tokenism approaches and instead promote genuine levels of public involvement¹⁷. Public participation as well as creating awareness and promoting community action is also seen as 'essential to the fine tuning of design, the mobilisation of local resources and to the long-term sustainability of the intervention'¹⁸. The government can also facilitate effective public participation through the removal of constraints for effective community involvement such as lack of resources (information, time, money), problems with language and public perception that their demands would be refused.

For planning to be accepted by the wider community it is critical that an urban management system for Samoa must respond to local needs and firmly based in *faaSamoa* (the Samoan way). The existing top-down approach where the government makes all the decisions on public services and urban development has not been entirely successful as evidenced by the current problems associated with growth and landuse. With limited local capacity, those responsible for the provision of services often have 'little or no knowledge or interest in communities' involved. Success will ultimately depend on the local people effecting the tasks themselves.

Finally the importance of political commitment to urban planning cannot be underestimated. Any 'planning exercises in which the ultimate decision makers are not involved, and for which they feel no particular responsibility are quite irrelevant'¹⁹. Strong political leadership is needed to create the necessary planning processes and institutions and to provide better plans, muster sound arguments and establish agendas for better policies and equitable community services. While the setting up of a town council will add yet another tier of authority to those discussed above, it is only with the establishment of a democratic urban authority that the negotiations, in good faith, with all concerned can begin.

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