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Demographic and social change in the island nations of the Pacific

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Most Pacific nations have small populations, but several of those populations are growing rapidly as a result of fertility rates as high as six or seven children per woman, young age structures, and low or declining mortality rates. Contraceptive use is lower in the Pacific than in many other developing areas. Weak family planning programs may help explain why fertility has remained high throughout much of the region.

Mortality rates have fallen significantly in Pacific countries during recent decades. Infant mortality is below 50 deaths per 1,000 infants throughout most of the region. As in other regions, infectious diseases are the leading cause of death where mortality rates remain high, and cardiovascular disease is the leading killer in countries with low death rates.

International migration acts as a safety valve for population growth in several Polynesian and Micronesian countries. In earlier periods migration was often temporary, but today it is increasingly permanent. Although remittances are an obvious benefit of this migration, they may have negative effects, such as long-term dependency.

Pacific nations generally have low levels of urbanization, although some have high rates of growth in their urban areas. High population density in rural as well as urban areas may be placing stress on the land and other resources of several countries.

Most Pacific nations spend a larger proportion of public funds on education than do most developing countries. For some, however, the results—as indicated by literacy, average years of education, and school enrollments—are below those of nations that spend a smaller share of their national budgets on education. Most Pacific nations also spend proportionally more on health than do most developing countries, and this has contributed to their lower mortality rates. Nevertheless, some have poorer health outcomes than do nations that spend less.

Forecasting agencies expect fertility, mortality, and migration to decline in Pacific nations over the next 35 years. These declines will result in a slowing of population growth, but growth rates will remain high in several Melanesian and Micronesian countries. Population increases are expected to range between 20 and 100 percent.

Those increases will present major challenges to Pacific societies. The number of new jobs that must be produced will at least double in most countries. Primary and secondary school places needed to maintain current levels of enrollment will increase by 20 to 90

percent. For nations wishing to provide schooling for all primary-age children and 60 percent of secondary-age children, the required number of school places will at least double, and for some countries it will increase sixfold. To deliver the same level of health services to their populations in 35 years as they do now, Pacific nations will have to provide two to four times as many doctors, nurses, and hospital beds. To help meet this demographic challenge, Pacific nations need to integrate population policies into their overall development plans.

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