Urban and Peri-urban Communities

Houses raised on stilts in Vanagi Settlement, Port Moresby, with new developments visible on the hills behind.
Vanagi Settlement, Central Province

How can it be that the sources of insecurity and hope are bound up with each other?

Opening Story

Chris Clement Wagi Dogale died in the Port Moresby General Hospital in the early hours of Saturday, 20 October 2007. He was also known as Wadi, named after his uncle. He died in the same hospital where he had been born on a Saturday in June 1979. Twenty-eight years on, his father Clement Dogale was woken at 3.00 a.m. to come to Chris’s bedside. Chris had been shot a few hours earlier, allegedly by police officers. The story of what happened has been told and retold by various people, and our understanding of the events of that night is a patchwork of narratives and snippets of information pieced together. Chris had been in a stolen car with four other young men when they were stopped by police. What unfolded after that is murky. We know that the driver and one of the other passengers escaped. The remaining youths were apprehended, and all three of them shot. One was shot and died immediately; a second was shot through the leg and fell; Chris was shot through the side of his chest. He fell onto the second youth covering him with blood. They were left on the rugby field. Both Chris and the second youth were later taken to the hospital. After hours of waiting for treatment the second youth left the hospital and later went into hiding. He later told others that it was because he covered in Chris’ blood that he had been presumed dead. His story forms part of the background to this account.

When Clement arrived at hospital, his son tried to sit up in bed. Chris showed no sign of his pain, although his father could feel it. The young man didn’t complain. Instead, he asked, ‘Are you cross with me?’ Clement replied, ‘No, but I love you’. It was one of the last things he said to his son, and he said later that he could see that Chris knew he was dying.

Two weeks later, after waiting for an autopsy to be finalized, the people of Vanagi Settlement and other relatives and friends gathered to mourn Chris’ death. On the day of Chris’ funeral the settlement was quiet; people waited for his body to be brought back home. The coffin arrived on the back
of an open truck. Clement and other men from the community who had accompanied the coffin carried it along the narrow lane to the family home. Frangipani and bougainvillea flowers were woven into the chain-link wire and corrugated-iron fencing along the path. Inside the house, family and friends gathered around the coffin, crying and moaning, while others sat and stood in silence outside. Women loudly called his cultural name—‘Wadi, Wadi’. Clement Dogale was wearing a T-shirt with the words ‘Learn today for better tomorrow’ silked-screened on the back. A crying child came out of the house where Chris’s body lay, and Clement held the child saying ‘You’re a strong girl, strong girl’.

After an hour or so, the men once again lifted the coffin, this time to take it to the community church—also the community learning centre and the place where Clement, a retired teacher, runs the volunteer preschool for the young children in Vanagi. Chris’ mother let out a piercing cry as her son’s body left her home. People took her arms to help her stand and to comfort her and. Then they and the other people at the mourning house walked behind the coffin as it was carried back past the bougainvillea and frangipani flowers tucked in the fence. The church was full of people sitting on the ground and others stood looking in through the metal bars around the perimeter of the building. The coffin was placed in the middle of the room, and female relatives and children sat around it. Many of the women and men wore white tops, and the children’s white T-shirts were printed with the words:
Kakzo madi,
Born freely,
Lived simply,
Passed silently,
Rest in peace.

Chris’s mother wasn’t crying now, but sitting silently next to his coffin, and leaning forward slightly with her shoulders hunched. Her eyes stared forward, and the full force of her grief was written in them. After an introduction by the Deputy Chairman of the community, Clement stood up to speak. He talked to the people assembled about his son’s birth, and how he saw Chris head showing from his mother’s body. He talked of his wife’s pain in the birth and the strength of women. He talked about the short life of his eldest child, and how in 1985, leaving the Salvation Army accommodation at Koki, the family had come to Vanagi Settlement, not knowing how long they would stay. It was here that his son grew up.

Chris won a place at Don Bosco Technical School, and his parents were proud. However, as Clement described it, Chris walked around with the wrong boys and often missed classes. His father gave him three chances, but in the end took him out of school to be educated in the settlement. When he was in his mid-twenties Chris’s life began shift. He began spending time with the pastor, and he and his father grew closer. As Clement found out after his son’s death, Chris had begun taking food to prisoners inside the Port Moresby Detention Centre. He had been writing poetry about his experiences. One poem talked about death and the pain it causes, but also its ability to bring a community together. Reading it now, the poem had prescient meaning for his father.

In finishing his address, Clement spoke of his son’s strength, and of the things he had learnt from him. He told the mourners ‘I have been reborn today’. Our hearts are breaking, he said, but we are strong too. We go on because there are things we have to do.

Through its Law and Order Committee, its school programs and community security arrangements, and its Village Court, Vanagi is doing a lot to address violence and safety in a settlement that was once one of the most dangerous in Port Moresby. Some of Vanagi’s sons and their friends have been called raskols, but the term covers a multitude of sins, from organized crime to silly misdemeanours. The sadness is that there are too many communities in Papua New Guinea grieving the loss of their sons. Adversity has ironically strengthened this community, but it is not the case in general across the country.
Vanagi Settlement is a small, densely populated squatter community located in Port Moresby South in the National Capital District, nestled between the coast and the area of Koki. It was the first settlement ever established in Port Moresby, and in 2002 became the first squatter community to be recognized by the National Capital District Commission (NCDC). It has a small but rapidly growing population, which was estimated at 376 in the 2000 national census (probably an under-estimate) but has grown substantially since then due to the birth rate within the community and the arrival of new settlers. It is now home to over 1,000 persons.

There are people in Vanagi who trace their relatives back to the original founders of the settlement. They tell the stories of how the community was founded, about how the place where Vanagi is now built was originally a resting spot for fishermen from the Hood Lagoon, Hula and Aroma villages in the Central Province. The men and their families would stop to rest after selling their catch at Koki market, or while waiting for the tide to take them back out to sea or home to their villages. In the late 1950s, two brothers from Keapara village in Hood Lagoon, Kamu Ma’a and Wala Ma’a, built homes and became the first settlers in this community. They were later joined by their sister Dau Ma’a, followed by other settlers from Hula, Hood Lagoon
and Aroma Coastal villages. Since then, settlers have come from provinces across Papua New Guinea. Because the original inhabitants were people who lived, sailed and fished on canoes, the settlement was named ‘canoe’. Recently, the community changed its name to ‘Vanagi’, which is a Motu word meaning the same thing.

There are now around eighty to one-hundred houses (some people say 200) within Vanagi, sharing a small area of land. They are mainly built with second-hand and reclaimed modern materials—wood, cement sheeting, unpainted weatherboards, louvre windows, rusting corrugated iron and sheet metal—although logs are often used for stilts. Many homes are make-shift huts; a few are more substantial dwellings with satellite dishes. Many are raised high above the water extending out from the coast, with dangerously thin wooden walkways connecting them to each other and the shore. There are open stoves on some of the walkways, and clothes lines stretched between houses for hanging out laundry. Small canoes are pulled up onto the shore or stored on wooden platforms beneath the houses. Looking out across the water, beyond the accumulating rubbish, Lade Kone Island is visible in the distance, and clusters of houses in other settlements can be seen dotted up and down the coast. In the other direction, Vanagi extends inland towards Koki market and the business area of Port Moresby South. There are more houses, not as closely packed but still with little room between them. Many are built on reclaimed land created by filling in shallow waters with gravel, rocks, soil and household rubbish.

A multi-purpose building, built with concrete blocks and metal, stands at the centre of the settlement. It serves as a learning centre, preschool, church, meeting hall and place for funerals. A number of trade stores are dotted around, along with small stalls, selling betel nut, lollies, drinks and food. There are no substantial vegetable gardens in the settlement, densely populated as it is, but banana palms and other plants and trees grow in places. Bougainvillea grows along fences and around some houses. Its bright pink and purple flowers stand out against the dusty ground and the piles of rubbish washed up on the shore and carried into Vanagi through open canals which run down to the sea from the business area and hills behind the settlement. Large buildings up on the hills—offices, apartment blocks and residential compounds filled with expatriates and members of Papua New Guinea’s emerging elite—stand visible in the distance.

**Organization and Governance**

The nature of Vanagi as an urban settlement means that its organizational structure needs to accommodate the considerable ethnic and linguistic heterogeneity within the community. The four main founding groups within the settlement are the Aroma, Hula, Keapara and Mailu ethnic groups, and belonging to one of these recognized founding groups carries with it a certain status within the community. In addition to these four groups, there
are families and individuals who have entered into the community through migration or inter-marriage. These include Kerema people from the Gulf, Mekeo people from Kairuku, Gorokas from the Eastern Highlands, Samarais from Milne Bay Province, people from the Sepik area; other Motuans from the Central Province; and New Guinea Islanders. Overwhelmingly and unusually, they live together with a shared sense of community and belonging.

Continuing but subordinate tribal forms of organization are evident in the choices of persons to head the various community committees and the extended family and kinship networks which provide a crucial social security system in the face of high levels of unemployment and a minimal capacity for subsistence agriculture within Port Moresby. Complex relationships of reciprocity—and connections through intermarriage—retain a central importance in the settlement despite the diversity of places of origin, and the strong influence of modern social, economic and cultural forms and systems. Strategic conversations with individuals and families in Vanagi indicated a strong sense of attachment to the place and the community, notable given that Vanagi is an urban squatter settlement with a relatively short history of establishment. Residents described a community which was relatively trouble-free, with a high level of respect for the property and wellbeing of others, reinforced by curfews and strict understandings of how to handle such issues as noise limits and alcohol use. When residents did speak of the still regular incidents of disturbance and
conflict, it was overwhelmingly in relation to perceived outsiders coming into the settlement from nearby suburbs.

The formal organizational structure in Vanagi is extensive. It was established in 1997, and includes an Executive Committee, a Community Improvement Committee, and a number of sub-committees which enjoy broad-based support and participation. The Executive — consisting of a chairman, deputy chairman, treasurer and secretary — meets monthly, and also holds special meetings whenever urgent matters and commitments arise. The nine sub-committees are responsible for organizing around education, housing, law and order, church, women, youth, health and sanitation, electricity and water; and sports. Sub-committee meetings follow the monthly Executive meetings, with the implementation of programs and activities involving the participation of committee members, community groups, elders and other residents. The sub-committees work co-operatively to organize community celebrations, particularly around Christmas and New Year. Church-run activities and spiritual development programs also contribute to the organization of the settlement and processes of community-building. There are six main denominations in the community, namely the United Church, Catholic Church, Seventh Day Adventist, Evangelical Alliance of Papua, Assemblies of God, and Pentecostal Church. All of them have strong standing, with none of them singularly dominant. This is perhaps reflective of the diverse ethnic, cultural and geographic origins of the population.

Being located within the boundaries of the National Capital District, people living in Vanagi Settlement have better access to some services than those living in hinterland or more remote communities. The community is able to utilize basic educational, health and postal services provided in Port Moresby. Approximately thirty-two households have electricity supplied to their residence, which they pay for. Similarly, thirty-four households pay for their use of a direct water supply. Community members express frustration, however, at the lack of response by the National Capital District Commission (NCDC) to their requests for increased and improved services.

Vanagi is recognized by government and non-governmental agencies as one the relatively well-organized communities in the National Capital District, and is often held up as a model of successful community development in the city. Nevertheless, it faces a number of problems and challenges. On a practical level, there is the problem of rubbish and waste accumulation. A lack of adequate waste and sewerage collection services is common throughout Port Moresby, and Vanagi faces the additional problem of waste washing up on its shores from elsewhere, and being carried into the settlement from canals and sewers originating further inland. The water in the canals often turns a bright red colour, suggesting the presence of sewerage or chemical waste being released into the drains from the residential or commercial areas behind the settlement. Residents indicated that it is a cause for real concern given that fishing is a main source of
livelihood and sustenance for many local people. Another practical problem facing the community is that of overcrowding. Already, Vanagi is densely populated, and there is little room for the settlement to expand. The population is increasingly steadily, and the rate of growth can only be expected to intensify in keeping with current trends, and given the massive rate of rural-urban migration which is predicted across Papua New Guinea in the coming decades.

Primary among the social problems identified by residents are drunkenness, fighting and noise disturbances. As mentioned above, these are often perceived to be the result of infiltration of the community by outsiders, particularly male youth. As one fifty-two year-old man described it: ‘There are drinkers here, from outside, that come in. They start up trouble’. The comments of other people throughout the community were much the same. Some of the older generation spoke fondly of the early years after the foundation of Vanagi, and expressed the sense that the emergence of social unease in the community was linked to recent changes. Lily Ma’a, a volunteer teacher at the preschool, said:

Sometimes I go back and think about those ways, our olden times when our parents were living here. We used to play around, there was no trouble. We used to walk free and go to each other’s houses and play around and at midnight we used to come back. But nowadays, I don’t think guests would go to each others houses and stay any more. Our area is alright but the outsiders, they get drunk and come in and torment us. Now young boys, they’re going out and drinking home-brews and [smoking] marijuana.

Like Lily, a number of people pointed to a decreased feeling of safety in the community, linked to incidents of brawling, problems caused by outsiders, and the increased use of alcohol and marijuana. Overall, however, responses to the Community Sustainability Questionnaire indicate that the felt sense of personal safety in the community is higher than in many of the other research sites. Seventy-nine per cent of respondents said that they were satisfied or very satisfied with how safe they felt, compared to an overall average of 71 per cent across all the sites including remote villages. And while participants in strategic conversations did identify particular social problems within the community, they also pointed to the presence of a number of co-ordinated community responses to these problems including the Law and Order Sub-committee, the presence of a magistrate, a Village Court at Koki, a peace officer, church-based programmes and activities, co-operation between elders and community leaders, and youth-focussed initiatives such as the organization of regular volleyball and rugby competitions.
Livelihood and Provision

Fishing is the main form livelihood activity in the community, and has been so since the settlement was first established, but it is not a strong industry. There are good fishermen within most families in the community, with fish providing a source of both sustenance and income, but not with the same consistency as in the past. In addition to fish, the main staple foods are rice, bananas and vegetables such as kaukau and yams. Some families have land on which to make small gardens, but most people rely on purchased food for their regular meals. There are a number of trade stores located in the settlement, and the busy Koki market is close. The supermarkets in Port Moresby are also easily accessible, although their prices tend to be expensive. Thirty-two per cent of respondents to the questionnaire listed local shops as the main place they got their food, with another 26 per cent listing food markets. Twenty-three per cent said that the supermarket was the main place they got their food. By contrast, the overall averages from all research sites were: 7 per cent, local shops; 4 per cent, food markets; and 5 per cent, supermarkets. In Vanagi, only 11 per cent of people said that their main source of food was work done on their own lands or fishing, compared to a figure of 78 per cent overall.

There is a high rate of unemployment amongst residents, reflective of the general employment shortage within Port Moresby. Of those people surveyed, 30 per cent said that they were receiving a wage from the state, a wage from private business, were a casual labourer or service worker, or were running a business. This roughly corresponds to the figures from the 2000 national census, which found approximately 35 per cent of people in Vanagi aged ten years and older to be in paid employment. The wages of these who work in paid employment tend to be used to support their extended families, and are supplemented by the informal sector work activities of other family members, including many children and youth. Conversations with residents revealed that the amongst those community members in formal employment, occupations included primary-school teaching, literacy teaching, medicine, plumbing, carpentry, welding, sign-writing, screen-printing, mechanics, cooking, building and manual labour. This amounts to a considerable range of skills present within the community. However with relatively few opportunities for formal employment, and no real capacity to practice subsistence agriculture, it is clear that small, informal income-generating activities are the main ways in which people in Vanagi sustain their livelihoods. Indeed, 37 per cent of respondents to the survey indicated that their main way of making a living was selling goods at market, and another 16 per cent said that they worked within the household. Another 12 per cent said that they worked in another way outside of the formal economy.

Informal income-generating activities practiced by individuals and families include selling fish, bettlenut, cigarettes and firewood; collecting and selling...
empty cans, copper wire and scrap metal; collecting and selling firewood; growing and selling seasonal fruits such as mangoes; making coffins; sewing; operating trade stores; selling sea shells; and selling live chickens and eggs. Many people selling small goods do so at Koki market, and a number also set up small stalls within the settlement or in its immediate surrounds. The main demands for cash are for the purchase of food, payment of school fees and contributions to community funds and activities. Most families ‘own’ their houses (though without formal legal title), and so do not have to make rental payments unlike many people within the city.

**Learning and Education**

There are a number of educational and learning initiatives within Vanagi. In addition to formal school education, there is a volunteer-run community preschool, a range of adult literacy and training programs, and the informal passing on of skills and knowledge through families. A key resource for many of these initiatives is the Community Hall, out of which the preschool is run, along with a range of workshops and skills-training sessions. The larger space also serves as a space for meetings, community gatherings and church services. The building includes a small room stocked with a few educational books, magazines and reports.

When asked about the highest level of formal education they had completed, responses to the Community Sustainability Questionnaire in Vanagi were relatively comparable to the overall results across all research sites, with people in Vanagi having just slightly higher levels of formal education than respondents in other sites. For instance, 3 per cent of respondents in Vanagi had completed either a university undergraduate or postgraduate qualification, compared to an average of 2 per cent for all the sites. Fifteen per cent had completed some sort of trade training, compared to a 13 per cent average for all the sites. Thirty-eight per cent of respondents in Vanagi had completed either some or all of their secondary education, a little higher than the overall average of 32 per cent. And 6 per cent had not completed any level of formal education, an apparently high figure but less than the overall average of 9 per cent.

Because of its central location in Moresby South, there are a number of elementary and secondary schools located close to settlement. However, community leaders and residents expressed concern at the dropout rate for school-aged children. Many leave during their time at secondary school, often because of difficulties in paying school fees. In addition, children and youth are often required to work in order to contribute to their family’s income, and many school-aged children can be seen around the settlement, selling small goods at stalls.

One of the most successful initiatives in Vanagi has been the establishment of a community pre-school. This development is the outcome of a program implemented in the late 1990s by the member for the Moresby South
electorate, the Hon. Dame Carol Kidu. Under the program, short training courses in early-childhood teaching were offered throughout the Moresby South area for interested volunteers. After the three-week course, these volunteers returned to their homes to establish community preschools. The Vanagi community pre-school opened in 1998, and is currently one of twenty-four located in the Moresby South area. They are co-ordinated through the Port Moresby South Community Preschool Association. Clement Dogale, a community leader in Vanagi and father of the late Chris Clement, is the President of the Association, and one of the teachers at the Vanagi pre-school. A retired teacher, he described his sense of disillusionment at the continuing problems affecting youth in Papua New Guinea, despite the large amounts of money being spent by the government on youth-focussed initiatives. When the training courses were offered he went along, motivated in part by curiosity, and by his feeling that things needed to happen in a different way:

I was one of those who trained to become pre-school teachers in our community. When I went in it was an eye-opener for me. I found that it was the thing I was looking for. I saw that it was the way to change Papua New Guinea … We went in and did the training for three weeks only, came back and started teaching children, with no pay, we just got interested and started teaching. Many of the children now are in the community schools, and they are ahead of other children. They are making a difference, which I am happy about.

Sixty-eight children enrolled in the Vanagi community pre-school in 2006, with around thirty attending each day. The program’s dependence on volunteers, however, makes it difficult to keep the pre-school going. Some of the individuals who initially trained as teachers have left leaving only Clement and one other core teacher. Some of the children bring twenty toea a day, which goes to support the teachers, and villagers support them with food. The pre-school also receives some funding from the local Latter Day Saints church, but it is not sufficient to pay an ongoing wage for the staff. Without this, is will be hard to ensure the continuity the program.

Another important dimension of the learning and education processes in the community is the informal exchange of skills and knowledge—both customary and modern. Older men pass down their skills in fishing, making nets and traditional canoes. Women pass down skills in sewing, cooking and baking to their younger female relatives. Outside of extended families, skills are shared through forums such as the women’s group, and through workshops co-ordinated through the Education Sub-Committee. Still, there is a sense that skills are slowly being lost, and both men and women express their frustration at not having access to adequate equipment with which to practice their skills, such as stoves, sewing machines and tools for making canoes or mending fishing nets.
Within Vanagi, there is a strong desire for further training and education. Eighty-eight per cent of people surveyed agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, ‘More training is necessary for doing the work that I would ideally like to do’. The types of training identified by these people as being most important were income-generation and management. Respondents also expressed a desire for more training in family life, as well as in technology and literacy. To a large extent, though, Vanagi is already a very skills-rich community. The variety of occupations in which residents are working, and the experience and knowledge present within families, amounts to a significant resource for this small settlement to tap into. Clearly, there is a demand for more training and educational opportunities, and there is no doubt that many households struggle to meet their basic needs and desperately need means of increasing their income, but there is also a strong foundation on which to build. Within a place like Vanagi, one of the key tasks in enhancing and promoting community learning will be to identify and most effectively utilize the diverse skills and knowledge which already exist, and then plan for educational and training programs to complement this existing base and provide new skills where they are needed.