Giving South Pacific youth a voice

Youth development through participation

Conducted by Youth for a Sustainable Future Pacifika
Commissioned by The World Bank Group

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**Acronyms**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DFY</td>
<td>Division for Youth (Samoa)</td>
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<tr>
<td>FAO</td>
<td>Food and Agricultural Organization (of the United Nations)</td>
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<td>FBO</td>
<td>Faith Based Organization</td>
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<td>MDG</td>
<td>Millennium Development Goals</td>
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<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-Governmental Organization</td>
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<td>NYC</td>
<td>National Youth Congress</td>
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<td>NYP</td>
<td>National Youth Policy</td>
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<td>PNG</td>
<td>Papua New Guinea</td>
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<td>PYMDGS</td>
<td>Pacific Youth Millennium Development Goals Summit</td>
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<td>SPC</td>
<td>Secretariat of the South Pacific Community</td>
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<td>STI</td>
<td>Sexually Transmitted Infections</td>
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<td>TNYC</td>
<td>Tonga National Youth Congress</td>
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<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
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<td>UN DESA</td>
<td>United Nations Department of Economics and Social Policy</td>
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<td>UNDP</td>
<td>United Nations Development Program</td>
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<td>UNESCO</td>
<td>United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization</td>
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<td>UNFPA</td>
<td>United Nations Population Fund</td>
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<td>UNICEF</td>
<td>United Nations Children's Fund</td>
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<td>USP</td>
<td>University of the South Pacific</td>
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<td>WHO</td>
<td>World Health Organization</td>
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<td>YSFP</td>
<td>Youth for a Sustainable Future Pacifica</td>
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<td>YOP</td>
<td>Youth Outreach Project</td>
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Acknowledgements

This report was researched and written by Shasheen Jayaweera and Kate Morioka, both of them founding directors of Youth for a Sustainable Future Pacifica (YSFP). YSFP is a network run by young people that is dedicated to empowering young South Pacific Islanders to engage in positive community development.

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Finally, this report would not have been possible without the hundreds of young people in the Pacific who spent time filling out surveys and sharing their thoughts in focus group sessions.

“If I had all the powers in the world, I would scream out at the top of my lungs and tell young people you are human beings as well. You have every right to have your voices heard!”

Young person from Fiji who participated in the project.
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1. Introduction
1. Commissioning the project

The role of The World Bank

In 2006 Youth for a Sustainable Future Pacifica was commissioned by The World Bank Group (Papua New Guinea) to undertake research into issues that affect young people in six Pacific Island countries: Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Vanuatu. The research project was prompted by youth consultations for the World Development Report (2007) in the South Pacific, which revealed a significant lack of understanding of the nature and reasons for marginalization of Pacific youth and how to encourage their participation in the development process. The countries were selected based on the South Pacific countries involved in the World Bank Global Distance Learning Network (GDLN).

A transformative initiative

The rationale of the project was to investigate the experience of youth in the Pacific and to identify practical and effective strategies to promote youth participation in national development. The report comprises a collection of views and opinions about opportunities and constraints as regards engaging young people in decision-making and national development. It also includes comments from representatives of Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs), chiefs, church leaders and government representatives.

The target group of young people was aged 15-29 years. More than 900 young people in six study countries were interviewed and consulted during the project. The sample of young people in each country was small and recruited via contacts, and is by no means statistically representative. However, it does provide a snapshot of youth concerns about marginalisation and social exclusion, and their recommendations on how to address them. Also presented are some examples of innovative solutions adopted by young people to improve their situation and organizations engaging young people in decision making.

Project objectives

- Identify and analyze reasons for youth marginalization and voicelessness in their home countries, including political, social, cultural and economic factors;
- Document best-practice examples of youth engagement mechanisms in the Pacific;
- Suggest practical strategies and recommendations to enhance youth engagement in the Pacific; and
- Involve young people directly in the design, planning, implementation and evaluation of this research.

Project goals

The overall goals of this research were to:

- Investigate the reasons for marginalization and voicelessness among Pacific youth.
- Identify practical strategies to promote youth participation in national development that could be adopted by the World Bank, governments and NGOs in the region.

Project findings

In broad terms the report found that young people across the survey nations want to participate in the development of programs and policy that address youth needs. The report recommends a series of practical and effective strategies for the World Bank, governments, multilateral and donor agencies, and civil society organizations to consider and implement. Responding to and implementing the recommendations outlined below is not the sole responsibility of either government or a single organization. The recommendations should serve as a basis for developing and/or reviewing youth policies, or simply evaluating the current youth engagement practices – a process which requires commitment and input from all stakeholders, including government, donor agencies, multilateral organizations, NGOs, young people and the community.
2. The future for young people in the Pacific

**Background**

Pacific youth are proud of their culture and heritage and want to see positive change, for them and their families. Pacific youth are also well aware of the issues and hardships facing them, their communities and their countries, but they know that they can make a productive and positive impact towards society. They have the ideas, dreams and will power to work towards this, while also the drive to want to further their education and obtain good jobs. They want to have their voices heard and they want to contribute to building a better future for their communities.

Pacific youth are also not a homogeneous group and this report recognizes the diversity of youth needs, including those of ethnic minorities, young people with disabilities, deportees, youth prisoners, homosexual and transgender youth, sex workers, HIV infected youth and child vendors.

Concerns about youth-related issues of employment, education, health and decision making, disengagement and marginalization of Pacific youth have been highlighted in numerous reports, declarations, policy strategies and publications. Comprehensive descriptions of youth issues and community concerns can be found in several other reports on Pacific youth (e.g. UNICEF, UNFPA and SPC 2005; 2006a). These are not discussed at length here. Many of these documents call for the greater participation of young people in the national development, planning and formulation of national priorities and the delivery of key programs. Yet, up until now there has been no study in which young people and decision makers have been directly consulted on their thoughts on participation and empowerment.
A rapidly changing demographic

Young people and children under the age of 25 account for well over half of the populations in the study countries described in this report. Figure 2.1 shows the population projections for the 15 to 29 year old age group as a proportion of the total population in Tonga, Samoa, Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu and Solomon Islands. Although the percentages aged 15 to 29 years are expected to decrease between 2004 and 2029, the number in this age group is projected to rise from around 2.1 million in 2004 to more than 3.2 million by 2029. It is therefore critical that strategies to engage youth in national development are implemented as soon as possible.

Figure 2.1: Projected proportion of 15-29 age group in the South Pacific

The fear of marginalisation

Perhaps the biggest issue facing youth in many of these Pacific nations is the fear – and reality – of finding themselves marginalized and voiceless. The demographic shift in favour of a younger population suggests that the largest, fastest growing and arguably most important age group finds it difficult to make any meaningful contribution to their country’s future.

The youth represented in the study are typical of their peers in terms of hopes and aspirations for the future, and their desire to help their communities to improve living standards. They felt that greater collaboration with decision makers, and communities could help to better identify youth concerns and develop effective strategies to remedy these concerns. Whilst some cultures actually discourage young people from expressing their views, it was the heartfelt desire of youth to become active citizens who could make a worthwhile contribution to their nation.

A time of transition

Youth is a time of transition from childhood to adulthood. The situation of young people in the Pacific region is intrinsically tied to cultural and societal norms and social structures that place a high value on hierarchy and authority. In fact, most Pacific societies are experiencing conflict between traditional and modern ways of living and thinking. They struggle to find ways to accommodate the pressures of globalization.

The difficulty of making the transition to adulthood is compounded by a variety of factors: cultural and family pressures; the failure to complete schooling and the difficulty of finding productive employment in job-poor economies.

1 Adapted from the Working Paper of the Pacific Institute of Advanced Studies in Development and Governance, University of the South Pacific, Suva, Fiji Islands, dated December, 2006.
Cultural and family issues

All six countries in this study have strong community values and cultural norms that shape individuals and society. Unfortunately, this includes a well-developed ‘culture of silence’ for youth in all the six study countries.2 Young people are expected to accept authority without question, to the extent that they are discouraged from sharing their ideas and suggestions with elders. This study found that young people feel they are not being included in decision-making processes, even in decisions affecting their own lives.

Ignorance and the unwillingness of parents and people in authority to understand the needs of young people limit youth participation in development, even though many survey respondents believe that adults and community leaders are aware of youth concerns. Even if adults understand youth concerns, they are perceived as unlikely to prioritize them or take action to address them.

Failure to foster inter-generational dialogue without fear and humiliation leads to misunderstanding, frustration, de-motivation, low self-esteem, disengagement and apathy among youth. This finding is consistent with the literature. Carling (2006b), for example, comments that the difficulties facing youth will continue unless there is greater investment in youth development.

While traditional forms of problem solving such as village meetings do bring young people and older generations together, they may be restrictive, with young people often finding themselves being shamed or scolded about their problems. Methods of effectively engaging young people and addressing youth issues seem not to be understood or prioritized by communities. Nor is there appreciation that engaging and empowering young people can assist the future prosperity and social harmony of nations.

The lack of schooling

Net primary school enrollment is above 95 per cent in only three of the countries with PNG, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu having enrollment ratios below 75 per cent. Gross secondary school enrollment3 is only 28 per cent in Solomon Islands, 32 per cent in Vanuatu and 64 per cent in Samoa (The World Bank 2006c). In addition, Tonga and Solomon Islands have experienced rioting and social unrest in recent years, while young people are thought to account for almost half of all law and order problems in PNG (SPC, 2004).

Employment issues

Youth unemployment rates exceed 10 per cent in four of the study countries and 30 per cent in two of them (World Bank 2006c), a condition which is not likely to improve in the near future without some form of national and regional intervention.

2 Refer to the literature review for a detailed discussion of Barr’s ‘culture of silence’ (Barr, 2005).
3 The gross enrollment ratio = total number enrolled at primary, secondary and tertiary level divided by the number eligible for enrollment x 100.
4 Figures for PNG were not available.
Authors’ thoughts on the Way Forward

The authors of this report were extremely grateful for the opportunity to learn first hand from Pacific young people about their issues, needs and ideas. From Papua New Guinea to Tonga, the young people who took part in this research shared a vision; a vision to address the problems faced by young people in their country and being involved in making a positive change for them and their families. Pacific youth are proud of their culture and heritage and they want to embrace new ways of thinking but preserve the cultural knowledge and customs provided to them by their ancestors. They want to have their voices heard and they want to contribute to building a better future for their communities.

Since economic conditions in the Pacific are unlikely to improve dramatically in the near future, special opportunities need to be created for young people, along with paths for them to productively engage with society. This is important to ensure they feel included, valued, empowered and able to contribute to society.

The report highlights a path towards achieving this, which has been built upon the suggestions of the numerous young people involved in the study, and also the numerous elders, government and NGO representatives interviewed to ensure that the path is suitable for the unique cultural and societal contexts. The recommendations were developed around three key categories which the authors felt go hand in hand and were vital to achieve the end goal. The categories include; Policy development and building institutional capacity to support youth participation, Youth participation in education and lifelong learning, and Youth participation in employment and training. Furthermore, the authors feel the importance of framing these strategies within clear long term visions for youth development in each country, compared to the current more ad-hoc nature of youth policies and visions which are not conducive to effective long term progress.

The authors of this report believe that the series of recommendations identified sets a clear path for how government, NGOs, parents, teachers, young, old, rural and urban dwellers can accommodate the changing needs and pressures facing young people. The authors believe that, the process of decision-making for young people is just as important as the actual decisions made.
3. Conducting the research

Establishing a research methodology

The report used participatory action research as the preferred methodology. This enabled us to offer practical suggestions and strategies for consideration by the World Bank, governments and civil society organizations in the region.

Action research applied a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods to gauge the attitudes of young people, as well as their views on cultural, social and financial factors. All of the aforementioned may affect their level of participation in society and in decision making. Care was taken to include a balance between genders, rural and urban youth, those going to school and school leavers, the employed and unemployed. Street children and disadvantaged youth are also represented in the study. Questions and discussion topics were formulated by the principal researchers on the basis of their prior experience as participants in youth forums and the literature review. Copies of the questionnaire and focus group guidelines can be found in Appendix 4 & 5.

Quantitative research

The quantitative data are derived from a questionnaire comprising 25 structured and open-ended questions which was distributed to selected young people in each study country. In some instances the questionnaire was given out and completed independently by the respondent, but in other situations, especially when the literacy level of the respondent was low, the questions were read out by one of the research assistants and the interviewer recorded the answers. In Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands and Tonga, the questionnaire was translated into the primary local language, and in these countries the research assistants used local languages when asking the questions.

A total of 596 young people participated in the questionnaire which was administered between August and December 2006. Approximately 392 young people, including some who had completed questionnaires, were also involved in the focus group discussions carried out in various rural and urban locations within each of the countries. The questionnaires were built around the purposive sampling method that involved respondents from a variety of backgrounds on a random basis. Notwithstanding, the sample was neither statistically significant size nor representative of the population. Representatives from government ministries, non-governmental organizations, religious groups and multilateral agencies were interviewed one-on-one.

Qualitative research

The qualitative component comprised focus group discussions (FGDs) conducted in both rural and urban areas. Each FGD centered on six main questions relating to youth participation (See Appendix 5) but also provided room for the discussion of other topics and varying levels of details based in the ideas of each group. In all countries, focus group discussions were conducted by one of the two principal researchers, with local research assistants acting as interpreters when necessary. FGDs comprised from three to 15 participants, but occasionally turned into discussion forums with contributions from a large number of young people. All FGDs were taped and subsequently transcribed, although notes were also taken during the discussions.

The questionnaires were entered into Microsoft Excel spreadsheets and analyzed by the project coordinators using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Qualitative data was transcribed and analyzed by categorizing interview and focus group responses into themes.

For clarity and simplicity, throughout this report, people who completed the questionnaire are referred to as ‘respondents’ and those taking part in the FGDs are referred to as ‘participants’.

Reviewing the literature

The first stage of the research involved reviewing existing literature on youth participation and youth development in the Pacific. Current literature suggests that there are numerous challenges and opportunities for engaging young people in contributing to community and national development. Whilst many of the documents and declarations advocate for young people’s voices to be heard, the cultural and political system in place may marginalize young people from having a voice and participating in decision making processes. The experiences of Pacific youth are also affected by the process of globalization in which they balance expectations of both the traditional and modern influences.
**Consulting with young people**

During the second stage of the research we consulted with young people and relevant stakeholders, collecting primary data on youth participation through a series of questionnaires and focus groups. These were conducted in all six countries between August and December 2006. Face-to-face interviews were also undertaken with government representatives, NGOs and religious organizations.

Young people implemented all aspects of the research, from designing the study and data collection methods to project management and report writing. As opposed to most previous youth research where young people are simply the subjects of the study, the young researchers developed a strong sense of ownership, growing confidence and research skills. In fact, they learned to think holistically about the issues that young people face and explore solutions. This included using an action research approach, in which data were analyzed at each stage and utilized to refine subsequent stages.

**Limitations**

While the study methods produced valuable data for each country, the study has several limitations.

**Small and unrepresentative sample**

Due to time and budgetary constraints and the exploratory nature of this study, no attempt was made to obtain a large or representative sample. Respondents were recruited on the basis of availability and the ability of research assistants to contact them. Efforts were made to obtain at least 100 completed questionnaires from each country, but this was not always possible. This report should therefore be treated as a descriptive snapshot rather than a comprehensive analysis.

**Variable quality of responses**

Some respondents provided rich information and detailed responses to questions, while others were less informative and did not answer the open-ended questions. Some respondents who filled in their own questionnaires did not respond to all questions, including a few who omitted basic information on age, education and gender. Some of these cases were dropped from the analysis, while some tables have missing data.

**Limitations on questionnaire design**

1. The questionnaire contained several similar questions. This contributed to differences in interpretation and quality of responses as some respondents interpreted them as repetitive. This refers particularly to the open-ended questions 12, 13, 20 and 21.
2. Some terms used in the questionnaire were unfamiliar to some respondents and resulted in differences in interpretation between different groups e.g. youth, elders, and leaders.

**Limitations of FGDs**

Although all the FGDs were facilitated by young people, some participants were unfamiliar with this process and so hesitated to participate, while others were naturally shy about speaking in a group situation. Young people in rural areas and young women were especially likely to be reluctant to articulate their concerns in a group situation. This meant that some of the FGDs were less fluent and contained insufficient quotable material. In one instance in rural Fiji it was not possible to promote discussion in a group situation, so the researchers reverted to one-on-one interviews.

Despite these limitations, the study has provided valuable insights. Engaging young people in the research process enabled them to learn how their peers perceived certain issues, as well as providing opportunities for the exchange of ideas. This is a first step in the process of social change. Post-consultation feedback from the research assistance included reports of increased confidence in conducting interviews and focus groups, increased ability to communicate with other stakeholders and more knowledge about the social research process. Accordingly, the research developed capacity and skills that, hopefully, can be utilized in future studies.