9. The Significance of Youth in Sustainable Development in the Pacific

Prepared by Secretariat of the Pacific Community and UNESCO with review from UNFPA

SUMMARY

In assessing the progress of youth development outcomes between 2005 and 2011, the State of Pacific Youth Report (UNICEF & SPC, 2011) presented a bleak picture further reinforced through the findings of the Urban Youth Report. Exacerbated by global economic crises, it shows that in some ways, the challenges facing youth have become more critical since 2005.

Government programs on youth development are often poorly resourced in terms of capacity of staff and funds, as the majority of investment in young people has traditionally been through education and health. However, careful targeting of labour and employment strategies to reach marginalised youth, greater use of preventive health strategies, addressing gender discrimination and a greater engagement of young people will accelerate an improved status of youth in the region.

Development efforts must be mainstreamed across sectors to effectively address youth challenges.

KEY ISSUES

Amongst a range of issues, employment remains the most significant issue facing young people – Pacific island economies have remained slow to progress while populations have continued to grow rapidly, particularly in urban areas. Educational systems focus on white-collar employment thereby excluding a sizeable population of young people who are left with few opportunities for employment. To date, the main investment of governments for youth development has been in tertiary education. However, it is not from a lack of educational opportunities that young people are not securing jobs – well qualified young people are also without jobs. The issue of underemployment exists because of the need for more jobs and more variety in the types of jobs in the formal sector. The larger issue of youth unemployment must take into account the need to provide income generating opportunities for young people who are unskilled, school drop-outs, those who are in rural areas, young women and marginalised groups.

This is linked to other issues including the significant potential for discontent and unrest, not to mention the economic and social burden for the working work-force. Estimates of lost output due to unemployment in the Pacific have been placed at approximately USD $828 million in 2011, increasing to USD $2.049 billion by 2015 and USD $3.18 billion by 2020. If we consider the common trend across the Pacific region, which is that the unemployment rate in the 16–24 years cohort is on average, double that of the entire workforce (16–64 years), we can assume that youth unemployment would attribute for much of the losses. The increasing involvement of young people involved in crimes and violence has been noted across the region, and meaningful occupation and ability to earn a living has been shown to play a key role.

Other issues affecting youth mentioned by Pacific Forum leaders include gender inequality, education, health, and youth participation in decision making. Recent studies identify worryingly high levels of violence against women in Pacific countries, and pinpoint young women and girls as the largest groups of victims of such violence. Pervasive gender inequalities are considered one of the key factors leading to such high rates of violence. Of health issues, mental health is high on the agenda for young people in the Pacific. Suicide as a significant cause of youth death, is concerning across the Pacific. Teenage pregnancy and high rates of sexually transmitted infections (apart from HIV) are also a major concern, especially as they share the same high risk behaviour pattern as HIV. These youth development issues are critical to address but require significantly increased investment. It is shrewd to invest in prevention and educational strategies amongst the youth
population, when addressing issues such as violence, youth suicide, non-communicable diseases and sexual and reproductive health.

Perhaps the greatest change needed to advance development outcomes for youth, is the need to engage young people in development efforts. As a means to accelerate achievement of outcomes, participation ensures that young people develop holistically as active citizens, and influences the development and delivery of innovative and well-targeted programmes and services. Investing in the potential of youth (both skilled and unskilled) will thus advance socio-economic and political developments in their respective countries and the region as a whole. Young people are not only about problems and challenges, but are also about solutions and development.

BACKGROUND

The region is characterised by a significant youth bulge. The youth age group of 15–24 years accounts for nearly two million people, which is close to a fifth of the region’s total population and as much as a third of the adult working age population. It should be noted that in many Pacific countries, youth is considered to go well beyond this age range, often due to a protracted transition to gain their independence. This sheer weight of numbers and the particular challenges young people face in their transition to independence indicates significant untapped potential that has not been fully explored.

There is no shortage of regional plans, strategies and declarations made to highlight youth as an issue of high priority. The Pacific Plan contained specific objectives for youth – informed by young people themselves. The Pacific Youth Strategy 2005–2010 was endorsed by Pacific Youth Ministers in 2005. The Forum Leaders’ Cairns Declaration 2009 recommended prioritisation of national actions to mainstream youth issues into national development agendas. In response to interagency and youth-led advocacy efforts, Pacific Island Forum Leaders recognised the need for more action to mainstream youth issues nationally and regionally – the Leaders’ Communiqué, 2011, highlighted the need to urgently address youth unemployment, and to include the voice of youth in decision-making. Leaders also recognised the need to increase youth resilience to reduce risk for involvement in crime and violence, and acknowledged the importance of sport in improving youth health was mentioned. Most recently, in 2012, Pacific Forum Leaders welcomed efforts by CROP agencies, UN agencies, and other partners to develop a Framework for Youth Development in the Pacific. Leaders also noted the work being done on youth employment and its importance to preventing social discord.

While these issues have been challenges for youth for some time, they have largely struggled to gain traction and to achieve clear improvements in outcomes, despite the various declarations and commitments made. Youth stakeholders recognise the urgent need to move beyond the rhetoric, to ensure real change is made to improve the lives of young Pacific Islanders.

A regional Youth Development Framework for the Pacific (PYDF) is currently in development to address youth issues in the region. Recognising the poor progress of the past, the PYDF aims to do business differently and focuses on action through coordination of development efforts (across development and donor agencies, governments and civil society), and steering resources towards outcomes for youth in the areas of employment and training, health, environment, and participation and governance. These outcome areas are identified by young people as the priority development issues across the region that will have greatest impact on young people’s lives, if effectively addressed. They will be supported by strategies to strengthen capacity, data collection and analysis on youth, policy and funding commitment, and meaningful engagement of young people, particularly those who represent marginalised groups. These support strategies are considered foundational to the success of the programmes and overall implementation of the Framework.
The Framework links past and current efforts as well as recognising the issues from the perspectives of young people. The emphasis on developing the Pacific Youth Employment Strategy (YES) as a key sub-component acknowledges the very critical need to address employment through a range of strategies including refo cusing and improving the quality of education, expanding livelihood options, and providing youth-focused employment services and new support structures to nurture the talents of young people.

The recent Education For All (EFA) Global Monitoring Report which reports on educational progress worldwide, highlights the issue of youth and skills. The Pacific has made great progress in access to education, yet the quality of education has not moved forward, and there appear to be insufficient links between education and employment. The development of more flexible, varied and skills-oriented learning opportunities has made some progress in the Pacific over recent years, but is limited by access, variety and volume of these opportunities.

With concerning rates of HIV and AIDS in PNG, Fiji and Tuvalu, and a wide agreement among stakeholders that HIV is under-reported in the Pacific as well as high rates of other STIs throughout the region, there is a critical urgency to address behaviour change to reduce the rate of infection and increase access to youth-friendly services. Of the population of young people, marginalised young people are most likely to engage in risky behaviour like drug and alcohol misuse and sex work. High teen fertility rates in many countries of the Pacific are limiting their education and employment opportunities and driving up overall fertility rates. Lifestyle diseases like obesity, diabetes, respiratory diseases and lung cancer appear to be increasing amongst young people in urban areas as a result of changing dietary patterns, social behaviours and low levels of physical activity. Health responses for young people need to address these realities and strengthen young people’s coping capacities to overcome life’s challenges.

Environmental concerns including climate change affect populations as a whole, however, young people have particular interest in these issues, as Kiribati’s President Aone Tong states, “global warming will change the lives of our young people in more ways than we can imagine. In 30–40 years, the nation, their home may no longer be habitable – it may not even exist”. Young people also have an important role to play in mitigating its effects and have articulated this through forums like the Pacific Youth Festival. Key actions are to involve young people in initiatives to address food and water security, climate change mitigation and monitoring and environment sustainability.

With regard to violence and crime, there is a minority but increasing number of young people involved in crime and violence in the Pacific. Current research shows that when large youth populations are combined with other factors such as high youth unemployment, economic hardship, political instability and social deterioration, conflict has a greater chance of breaking out. Worldwide, male youth perpetrate more than three-quarters of all recorded violent crime. The Forum Regional Security Committee endorsed eight principles for preventing youth involvement in violence and crime, to guide holistic responses for implementation.

Young Pacific Islanders often do not have the opportunities to develop essential life skills through their participation as valid social actors in national and regional development. Participatory activity to date has been dominated by one-off events and project-specific participation, which in worst cases have been tokenistic, rather than a systematic engagement of youth citizens to meaningfully inform development agendas. Enabling and disabling factors are leaders’ knowledge of youth and their potential, systemic factors of institutions and government machinery, and the influence of tradition and custom. The establishment of the Pacific Youth Council continues to strengthen as a representative structure engaging youth throughout the Pacific. This participatory structure and other networks, particularly those that can reach marginalised groups of young people, for example,
young people with disabilities, need to be strengthened in terms of their capacity to meaningfully engage young people in national and regional development.

KEY DOCUMENTS AND HYPERLINKS


http://www.unicef.org/pacificislands/1850_11016.html


7 Several anecdotal reports and media reports highlight suicide as a significant concern. See also UNICEF, SPC, UNFPA 2005. Op cit. P. 30.
8 SPC, 2010 Total & Teenage Fertility (2010), Statistics for Development Division, Secretariat of the Pacific Community, Noumea
9 SPC, 2010, STI Epidemiological Update PICTs 2009, HIV & STI surveillance, Secretariat of Pacific Community, Suva