

# **Young people's participation in the Pacific – facilitating factors and lessons learned<sup>1</sup>**

By Dr Chris McMurray

**Paper prepared for a seminar on  
“Children's Rights and Culture in the Pacific”  
30th October 2006**

---

<sup>1</sup> *The opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of UNICEF.*

## CONTENTS

### 1. A profile of Pacific youth

### 2. Issues for Pacific youth

### 3. Causes of common youth problems

#### 3.1 *High-risk behaviour as a response*

#### 3.2 *Group One: Key economic and structural issues:*

##### 3.2.1 Poverty

##### 3.2.2 Education systems focussed on white-collar employment skills

##### 3.2.3 Stagnating economies that do not provide enough employment opportunities

##### 3.2.4 Rural/urban inequalities

##### 3.2.5 Instability

#### 3.3 *Group Two: Cultural and attitudinal factors.*

##### 3.3.1 Conflict between traditional and modern cultures

##### 3.3.2 Authoritarian parenting methods

##### 3.3.3 Discrimination, disempowerment and lack of a voice in social dialogue

### 4 The concept of youth participation

#### 4.1 *Youth participation as a right*

#### 4.2 *Enabling and disabling factors*

### 5 Increasing youth participation in the Pacific

#### 5.1 *Some examples of best practice*

#### 5.2 *Implications are for youth participation in employment and income generation*

#### 5.3 *Implications for youth participation at family and community level*

#### 5.4 *Implications for youth in governance structures*

### 6. Conclusion: A multi-faceted approach to youth participation

## | References

**ABSTRACT:** *Around 20 per cent of the population of the Pacific is aged 15-24. In most countries substantial numbers of young people are dropping out of school and unable to find employment, while many are at risk of engaging in substance abuse, exposing themselves to unplanned teenage pregnancy and also to STIs including HIV/AIDS, living on the street and/or involving in crime or civil unrest. Some of those who can find no solution to their problems attempt or commit suicide.*

*At the root of many of the problems that beset young people in the Pacific is low self-esteem. Poverty is increasing, and in most countries there is little choice in education, a scarcity of wage employment and rural/urban inequalities in access to services and living standards. These factors erode the confidence of young people in their ability to find a secure future. Youth self-esteem is further undermined by authoritarian parenting methods, which are the norm in the Pacific, conflict between traditional and modern cultures, gender discrimination and general disempowerment of younger cohorts.*

*Greater participation of youth is a right under CRC, national bills of human rights and CEDAW. Increased youth participation at the family, community and national levels improves the social relevance of decision-making and raises youth self-esteem. This can help to limit high-risk behaviour.*

*Although as yet there are relatively few examples of effective youth participation in the Pacific, some of those discussed in this paper provide good models. They include youth media initiatives and youth networks; a Fijian mechanism for a panel of youth to provide advice to government; and youth participation at conferences to discuss national policy.*

*An important aspect of strategies to involve youth is to take into account the generally hierarchical and conservative nature of Pacific society. Methods need to be devised to exploit Pacific notions of community participation rather than allowing traditional attitudes to disable attempts to increase youth participation. It is also essential to ensure that participation includes provision for follow-up and action.*

*There is now considerable awareness at the regional level of the potential benefits of increasing youth participation, and in particular that it can benefit to the whole community, not just young people themselves. What is needed to enhance youth participation in the Pacific is incorporation of youth participation objectives into a wider range of community activities, development of formal and informal mechanisms to ensure and sustain youth participation, and increased commitment to making youth participation a reality. This can only be achieved with a multi-faceted approach that raises awareness, creates an enabling environment and provides youth with the life and work skills to fully participate in their communities.*

## 1. A profile of Pacific youth

The Pacific Region spreads across one third of the surface of the Earth, and encompasses 15 separate political entities. Although the combined population of these countries is less than 9 million, more than half are children or youth. Table One shows that in 10 of the 15 countries in the region the median age is less than 21 years; that is, half the people are below this age.

The UN general definition of children is all ages under 18, but definitions of children and youth overlap. 'Youth' is ages 15-24 years, while those aged 0-15 are considered to be children (<http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unyin/qanda.htm>). While the Pacific generally follows these core definitions, it is common for young people up to age 30 to be regarded as youth, especially those who are unmarried.

There are more than 1.6 million Pacific people in the core youth ages, 15-24 years (Table One). In almost all Pacific countries this age group accounts for around 20 per cent of the total population, and at least half the total population is under age 25. If their latest recorded population growth rates were sustained, Federated States of Micronesia, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga and Vanuatu could all expect their youth population to double within 30-40 years.

Despite their numerical importance, young people tend not to be heard in Pacific society. In both the family and the community they are expected to 'be seen and not heard' and there are few avenues for them to participate actively by voicing their opinions or communicating their needs. Parents expect young people to do as they are told without question, and government investment in youth is principally in the form of health and education services. Children and youth are expected to be satisfied with the services provided for them and remain silent.

Throughout much of the region large percentages of the people live subsistence or semi-subsistence lifestyles and have low incomes, while there are few opportunities for paid employment outside the public sector. Kiribati, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tuvalu and Vanuatu are among the world's least developed countries, while Papua New Guinea (PNG) has some of the greatest disparities in incomes within a single country. Within the age group classified as youth, poverty and gender differences exacerbate youth problems. Appropriate behaviour and roles for boys and girls are strictly defined by culture, and generally girls have even less freedom and less opportunity to express their views than do boys.

In most countries girls are least likely to receive a fair share when resources are scarce, and are usually the first to be withdrawn from school when families cannot afford school fees for all their children. Because of cultural attitudes, the fact that girls have equal or even superior aptitude for learning English and undertaking formal studies is often ignored (e.g. Government of Tuvalu and UNICEF, forthcoming).

This paper examines youth participation in the Pacific. Youth participation can be defined as active involvement of young people in discussions and in decisions that affect their lives, and the lives of their family and community. It encompasses their participation in education, the workforce, community activities and decision-making at all levels, including national level decisions on young people's development. It means that young people think for themselves, express their views effectively, and interact in a positive way with other people (Save the Children, 2006). A particular focus of this paper is mechanisms to engage Pacific youth and enable them to express their views and participate in decision-making

## 2. Issues for Pacific youth

The transition from childhood to adulthood involves physical, psychological and social changes, and is almost always challenging. '*... the major task for adolescents is to re-evaluate who they are and how their bodies and identities have changed. They strive to establish final independence from their families and others their age, to become their own person. They struggle to understand the meaning of life and how to interact with others of the opposite sex. They are faced with answering the question of how they want to spend the rest of their lives...*' (Donley and Keen, 2000).

In the Pacific this transition is complicated by the destabilisation of traditional lifestyles by modernity.<sup>2</sup> Juxtaposition of traditional and modern cultures and values increases the level of uncertainty in young lives, and presents difficulties for young people and also for their adult carers. Traditional cultures based on shared understandings of social roles determined the information and life skills necessary for survival, and provide protection and identity (Hooper, 1993: 316). Regardless of where they were located in the traditional social hierarchy, most people had social recognition and largely pre-defined roles.

In contrast, modern societies introduce new ideas and opportunities and offer much greater possibilities for social mobility and success or failure. Status and wealth tend to be determined by performance rather than being hereditary attributes. Colonialism established white-collar employment, high wage incomes and the accumulation of material goods as the main markers of success, and these indicators were widely adopted in the Pacific, even in countries such as Tonga that were never colonised. While parents tend to believe that education is the passport to their children's success, many do not appreciate the need to match education and ambition with aptitude and opportunity. Often neither parents nor education systems invest sufficient resources or respect in alternatives to white-collar oriented education, especially in technical and vocational education (TVET).

Especially difficult for Pacific young people is that many of the values and practices of a modern society are in direct conflict with those of their traditional societies. Traditional societies tend to resist change and questioning of their identity, whereas modern society promotes freedom and democracy, new ideas, discussion and debate. The Pacific way of learning is by passive observation, whereas modern education systems promote active engagement and research. Passivity and unquestioning respect for leadership bring acceptance in a traditional Pacific society, whereas evaluation and initiative are the keys to success in a modern environment.

Most Pacific communities tend to be very conservative, and usually neither males nor females have a voice in community affairs unless they are the head of their family or an elder. Youth and also women tend to be passive members of the community. In most Tuvaluan villages, for example, only those aged 50 or more have a vote on the village council of elders (*falekaupule*), and everyone under that age is regarded as the 'youth' of society. In Tokelau, village councils (*taupulega*) comprise elected heads of extended families, and on two out of the three atolls the minimum age for council membership is 60. Informants commented that this marginalisation of the young makes them more likely to endorse conservative viewpoints if they are given any opportunity to speak, because agreement with the elders is seen as the pathway to

---

<sup>2</sup> This discussion of issues for Pacific youth and the challenges of modernity is drawn from the comments of informants and the writer's observations of Pacific societies.

acceptance (Government of Tuvalu and UNICEF, forthcoming; Government of Tokelau and UNICEF, forthcoming).

While the media is a powerful tool for promoting learning and spreading information, much that it depicts challenges traditional values. Some of the information obtained from the media can even be dangerous for those raised in an unquestioning environment. Western entertainment glamorises confronting and illegal behaviour and lifestyles that are unattainable and/or questionable as regards promotion of human happiness. Television commercials taken literally can promote consumerism, debt, and poor nutrition. Movies idealise normal family living conditions and depict love and sex without contraception or pregnancy. Movies about violence and ruthless ambition appear real to those unaccustomed to questioning what they see. Copying these images can destabilise lives and court disaster.

Another characteristic of modernity that contrasts with traditional society is that it is constantly changing. Everything, from government to fashions in clothing, is subject to review and change. In traditional societies items such as clothes and housing are not replaced until they are worn out, but modern consumer goods have built-in obsolescence and become unfashionable or superseded by superior models. Past Pacific generations needed only to master the skills of their parents and grandparents, but the modern generation must find its way through an ever-expanding body of information and skills. Young people in the Pacific now learn skills that were unknown when their parents were born, such as use of electronic equipment.

Coping with modernity challenges adults as well as youth. Young people searching for their own identity may discover that their parents are also uncertain or dissatisfied about their own place in society. This adds to youth insecurity and can fuel rebellion if the parents appear to have unrealistic expectations of their children. The whole community including teachers faces the challenge of planning appropriately for youth developmental needs in the context of national development.

These issues are a concern because they undermine the capacity of young people to contribute to their society and enjoy a fulfilling life. Those who do not receive sufficient or appropriate education and/or do not progress to productive employment can be viewed on the one hand as under-utilised economic and social resources, but on the other hand as citizens who are denied their social entitlement. It is hardly surprising if they adopt high-risk behaviour to vent their frustration, but this leads to alienation and restricts opportunity and choices. Those who damage their health through substance abuse or unsafe sex, or bear children while they are still themselves children, also limit their options. In the worst cases, valuable young lives are lost altogether because of deaths caused by high risk or self-destructive behaviour.

## **2. Causes of common youth problems**

### *2.1 High-risk behaviour as a response*

Most young people are bursting with potential to work hard and to express their creativity, and it is crucial that they have outlets for their energy and to opportunities to develop their attributes. Youths who are disadvantaged in some way, lacking in life skills or unable to find a constructive and creative outlet are especially likely to turn their energies towards negative or self-destructive 'problem' behaviour.

While many agencies and policies have attempted to prevent high-risk youth behaviour, insufficient effort has been devoted to addressing the underlying causes.

This is primarily because the behaviours tend to be obvious and socially disruptive, while the causes are complex and difficult to address. Moreover, since the causes are many and diverse, they are often misunderstood or underestimated. In reality they are usually symptomatic of interrelated economic and social problems, their prevalence tends to reflect socio-economic patterns, and they operate at different levels: personal, family and community.

For example, it is striking that the six causes of juvenile delinquency in Fiji mentioned by Adinkrah (1995) are all factors that are beyond the control of young people themselves. They are: the dependent status of youth; broken homes; rural-urban migration, violence and sexual behaviour on the media; domestic violence and sexual abuse in the home (1995: 28-36). These behaviours are symptoms of social and economic factors that young people cannot control. Clearly, then, simply imposing discipline and attempting to reform offenders will not stop delinquent behaviour unless the causes are also addressed.

It is most important to recognise that the issues and high-risk behaviour described here and documented in many other publications and policies, are youth problems as seen from an adult perspective. While they are real issues with potentially very serious consequences, youth do not necessarily view them as problems, and nor are they necessarily committed to their elimination. If pressed, most Pacific young people would probably mention these high-risk behaviours as 'youth problems', because they know this is how they are viewed by adult society, but when asked to name the main concerns in their own lives, other concerns usually take priority. Youth who are actually engaging in high-risk behaviours are more likely to see them as their only available avenue for fulfilment or enjoyment rather than a personal problem. The relationship between high-risk youth behaviour, community perceptions of youth, youth visions and youth self-esteem is thus complex.

Despite this complexity, it is possible to identify some underlying factors that push young people into high-risk behaviour. They can be classified into two groups. The first group comprises key economic and structural issues that are widely recognised as central concerns in most Pacific development strategies. The second group comprises cultural and attitudinal factors. All of the causes are interrelated, and tend to reinforce each other. Often their main impact on youth is erosion of self-esteem. As studies of youth substance abuse in Kiribati, Tonga and Vanuatu have shown, attempting to resist this erosion with self-gratification or proof of self-worth is a major factor driving youth into high-risk behaviour (PAHP, 2001a, 2001b, 2003).

### | 3.2 Group One: Key economic and structural issues:

#### 3.2.1 Poverty

Although poverty was seldom mentioned in connection with traditional Pacific subsistence society, it is an increasing concern in the region. Many Pacific Islanders now depend on store-bought food as well as consumer goods, while cash is needed to access basic services such as health and schools or to pay for transport to reach them. Those without cash are disadvantaged in terms of the modern economy and disadvantaged relative to others, even if they are 'affluent' in subsistence terms<sup>3</sup> In Tonga, which is often perceived as a relatively comfortable Pacific society, a 2003 study classified 23 per cent of the population as below the Basic Needs Poverty Line (ADB, 2004: xi). Similarly, in Solomon Islands in 2006, 87 per cent of a sample of 1085 respondents from Malaita, Guadalcanal, Honiara, Western and Choiseul said that basic goods were becoming unaffordable, while 70 per cent rated the economic

---

<sup>3</sup> Fisk (1978) coined the term 'subsistence affluence' to describe traditional Pacific lifestyles.

situation of their household as worse than it had been a year previously (AusAID, forthcoming).

There is an obvious connection between poverty and low self-esteem among youth (Mosley, 1995). Observing more privileged groups enjoying modern consumer goods and modern lifestyles while being subjected to media messages that promote unattainable lifestyles clearly contributes to low self-esteem. Exclusion from participation in the modern economy also creates 'poverty of opportunity' (UNDP, 1999) which, in turn, encourages high-risk and self-destructive behaviours. Studies in seven Pacific countries found that poverty was associated with increasing involvement in transactional sex with children and child sex work (RRRT and UNICEF, 2004). Other obvious consequences of poverty, as demonstrated by the case of Papua New Guinea, are involvement in crime, including theft and robbery (Chand and Levantis, 1998), and living on the street.

### *3.2.2 Education systems focussed on white-collar employment skills*

Dropping out of school and high rates of unemployment are interrelated symptoms of two underlying problems: inflexible education systems geared mainly towards white-collar work and distorted economies that do not provide enough employment opportunities for young people. The earliest formal education systems in the Pacific were established by missionaries in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and focussed on teaching reading and writing in the mother tongue to enhance community participation in religious observation (Gannicott, 1993). Subsequently provision of education became part of governance, with the prime objective of creating a cadre of clerks to support administrations - in most cases administration by a European colonial power. Education continued to emphasize literacy, but now in the language of government (usually English or French) rather than the mother tongue. Mathematics, Sciences, History and Geography also became core subjects. This emphasis on skills for white-collar employment led to neglect of life skills for survival and skills for employment in the private sector and in rural areas.

Although job seekers far outnumber white-collar vacancies in most contemporary Pacific countries, this emphasis persists today, with only limited training in technical and vocational education and training (TVET) in secondary schools, mostly for those who perform poorly in academic subjects. Students who are not academically oriented are likely to struggle and lose interest, and eventually drop out or be pushed out of school by poor performances and parents who cannot see any value in their continuing. As TVET opportunities are generally underdeveloped and/or of poor quality, few of those who lack aptitude for academic study have access to quality education appropriate to their skills and interests. Usually the few TVET opportunities that are available are regarded as second-rate alternatives for those who cannot make it in mainstream, white-collar oriented education. Although these problems have been widely recognised and most Pacific countries are making efforts to reform and expand choices in education, progress has tended to be very slow (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2001; Fiji, Ministry of Education, 2005).

### *3.2.3 Stagnating economies that do not provide enough employment opportunities*

Job search in a very limited job market is always discouraging. As Pacific economies are typically based on trade and administration and manufacturing and small enterprise sectors are underdeveloped, there are relatively few wage employment opportunities. Political instability, inefficient management of national budgets and/or stagnating economies exacerbate the lack of employment opportunities. Young people who have done well in the education system and/or have good connections take up the best jobs, but many others are discouraged by failure to find work or by mismatch of their education and employment. Paradoxically, because of the poor

quality and low morale in local TVET, countries such as Fiji recruit thousands of skilled tradesmen from other countries while their own youth remain jobless (Fiji, Ministry of Education, 2005).

#### 3.2.4 *Rural/urban inequalities*

The situation of young people in rural areas is even worse because of disparities in basic services and the concentration of secondary education and employment opportunities in urban areas. This promotes a flow of young people to the towns, many pushed by parents who expect them to obtain a better education and more lucrative employment than is available in rural areas. The majority of Port Vila's SPRs<sup>4</sup> and the young men who fill in their days by sauntering along the streets of Honiara have been sent to town to find work, or have come with relatives who are themselves looking for work (Mitchell, 1998). Those who cannot find work are likely to turn to high-risk activities to fill in their time, boost their self-esteem or even just as a way of surviving. Despite the scarcity of employment opportunities, ECREA's survey of Fijian youth found that the majority of unemployed young people interviewed in both rural and urban areas '*still harboured dreams of being civil servants*' (ECREA, 2002: 33-34).

#### 3.2.5 *Instability*

Political instability exacerbates the four underlying causes discussed above. For example, in the past few decades Fiji has experienced several coups that have brought political uncertainty and economic setbacks, while Solomon Islands has experienced several episodes of violent conflict that caused the closing down of all urban services and business and the loss of many employment opportunities. Papua New Guinea, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu have had frequent changes of government and/or economic policies that hinder optimum development of services and employment opportunities.

Such instability affects youth by further restricting their opportunities, making them vulnerable to manipulation and exploitation as petty criminals and making criminal activity appear as an easy and logical way to resolve economic inequality. Youth were involved in arson and looting during the coups in Fiji, in Solomon Islands during 'The Tensions' and in April 2006, and in the burning of Nuku'alofa in November 2006. Even if they are merely bystanders or attempting to stop the unrest, any youth present at such events are likely to be perceived as culpable and blamed, as was the case in Nuku'alofa (Email from E. Howard to YSFP, 27<sup>th</sup> November, 2006).

The on-going involvement of youth in Papua New Guinea's criminal 'Rascol' gangs, discussed above, can be attributed largely to failures in governance. In extreme situations youth may be manipulated as rebel forces, as in the case of Solomon Islands, where the bulk of the armed rebels during 'The Tensions' were youth. Any involvement in civil unrest brings the risk that young people will be maimed or killed, or will seriously damage their future prospects by incurring criminal records.

### 3.3 *Group Two: Cultural and attitudinal factors.*

#### 3.3.1 *Conflict between traditional and modern cultures*

Hooper (1999: 3) observed that '*Culture plays a much more significant role in national economies and national life of Pacific countries than it does in most other regions of the world*'. In the Pacific there tends not to be a progression from

---

<sup>4</sup> The term SPRs derives from the Bislama phrase 'sperem public rod', literally 'hit the road'. Since unemployed young people spend much of their time wandering around, in Vanuatu they are called SPRs (UNICEF and AusAID, 1998).

traditional to modern lifestyles and attitudes. Rather, they exist side by side within each person. Hezel (2001), writing of Micronesia, describes a raft of conflicts between traditional culture and the requirements of a modern lifestyle that have impacted on various aspects of life, including the family, land ownership, gender roles, sexuality, political authority, and observances of birth, marriage and death. Adults' struggles to manage these conflicts are observed by, transferred to and impact on young people.

Youth perceptions of cultural conflict are expressed very well in the following comment from a young Fiji Islander:

*'Youth in Fiji and in the Pacific are in a state of confusion. We are victims and witnesses to the change in lifestyle and introduction of new ideas through formal education, trade, international and regional relationships, Christianity and the new central government system. You see, most of the issues we in Fiji are facing today are because we are witnesses of the tussle between communal rights and individual rights, between democracy/ legal systems and the chiefly rule/ hierarchy, between formal education and customary knowledge, between religions of the past and Christianity today. On top of that we have unique multiracial issues. All of these value systems are operating simultaneously and we youths are caught in the middle and this situation gives birth to the current problems we are facing today such as unemployment, poverty school dropouts, alcohol and drug abuse. We are taught one thing at home and exposed to another in society. Young people need the right information at the right age, to make the right decisions and not bombard them all at once with knowledge that would put unwanted pressure on them' (Carling, 2005: 9).*

### 3.3.2 Authoritarian parenting methods

Customary authoritarian parenting methods do little to ameliorate this confusion. Whereas young people need guidance and counselling, traditional parenting methods focus on discipline. Many parents view corporal punishment as an essential part of responsible parenting and an indication that they love and care about their children. But while *'love is the central justification for punishment, punishment is sometimes perceived by children as a withdrawal of love'* (Save the Children, 2005: 88).

Authoritarian parents thus tend to undermine youth self-esteem, and foster resentment and alienation in their children, especially when harsh physical punishments or belittling is used to enforce passivity and silence. Youths oppressed in this way tend to turn to their peers for support and often form stronger bonds with siblings and peers than with parents. If subjected to peer pressure to engage in high-risk behaviour, they are unlikely to confide in their parents or seek their support. Many research studies have shown that authoritarian parenting methods tend to promote rather than discourage adolescent rebellion and high-risk behaviours (Carr and Vandiver, 2001).

Young Fijian informants said that children tend to be raised as the property of parents and taught that it is the right of parents and family to discipline them. *'We are taught to sit quietly in adult company without speaking, or to go outside and not bother the adults. If we attempt to express our opinions we are criticised and belittled and told to keep quiet because we do not know anything about life'* (UNICEF, 2005: 32).

Adinkrah (1995: 168) confirms this in his comments on parenting in Fiji.

*'... deference to authority pervades the entire Fijian social structure and is reproduced through the socialization process, beginning in infancy. From the time they learn to speak Fijian children learn that to ask questions of adults is*

*to incite verbal rebukes, while to challenge or actively disobey the dictates of an adult is to invite corporal punishment'*

As well as promoting high-risk behaviour, authoritarian parenting is poor preparation for modern lifestyles and wage employment, because it suppresses enquiry, innovation and evaluation. Raising children to be passive can even impair mental development and make it difficult for them to learn new skills later in life (UNICEF, 2004: 2).

### 3.3.3 *Discrimination, disempowerment and lack of a voice in social dialogue*

The tendency for adults and leaders to force youth into a passive role and exclude them from decision-making is widely regarded as normal behaviour in the Pacific. It is seldom recognised as a form of discrimination, even though most governments have endorsed The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and most are aware of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), even if they have not yet endorsed it. Gender discrimination, discrimination against sexual minorities and discrimination against the disabled also tend not to be recognised, although they can be seriously damaging to youth self-esteem. As discussed by Griffen elsewhere in this monograph, wherever youth are marginalised, girls tend to be more disadvantaged than boys. In addition, sexual minorities are more disadvantaged than heterosexuals and disabled youth more than the able bodied (UNICEF, 2005: 37, 39).

Although the difficulty of finding wage employment is one factor that undermines youth self-esteem, wage employment is not necessarily the panacea for youth 'problems'. This is demonstrated by the example of Tokelau, a tiny country almost without poverty and unemployment<sup>5</sup>. Tokelau preserves a strong traditional social hierarchy in the presence of modern material lifestyles and media messages. The Tokelauan education system ends at Form 5, and the majority of students leave school at age 16. All male school leavers are eligible for casual wage employment in the village workforce, and on some atolls female school leavers also can enter the village workforce.

Despite this ready availability of employment, it appears that heavy drinking and unprotected and promiscuous sex is becoming common among Tokelau youth. There have also been several cases of youth suicide. Informants, both youth and adult women, said that many young people feel forced to grow up too soon and feel disempowered as regards determining their own future. As the Tokelau school curriculum focuses on academic subjects, 16-year-old boys have to learn their skills on-the-job, performing demanding and sometimes dangerous work such as construction, road maintenance and stevedoring. Most also have to do household chores as well as spending hard days working in the sun. Since they are unskilled manual workers, they are at the bottom of the social hierarchy and tend to feel without choice or opportunity for self-improvement. Adopting high-risk behaviour appears to be both stress release and an attempt to build self-esteem with displays of bravado. Youth informants said the main reason they drink alcohol is to unwind and relax, but when they start to drink, the objective is to be the one who can drink the most - the 'best drinker' is the last one still able to stand.

Girls who find white-collar work in Tokelau or are kept back to work in the home after leaving school also may feel pushed into adulthood too soon. Informants said there are strong community and family pressure to marry and have a family as soon as possible, and they feel disempowered and without choices. They said almost every

---

<sup>5</sup> This example is drawn from the author's fieldwork in Tokelau in July/August 2006.

girl experiences pressure from male peers to engage in sex, but as there is virtually no confidential access to contraception for Tokelau youth, there are increasing numbers of unplanned pregnancies and a high risk of STIs.

In this example the community believes it is doing its best for its young people and many adults cannot understand why high-risk behaviour is increasing. Because of widespread acceptance of the traditional social hierarchy, it is simply not recognised that the source of problems could be that youth are reacting against discrimination, disempowerment and their lack of a voice in community affairs.

## **4 The concept of youth participation**

### *4.1 Youth participation as a right*

As defined in Section One, youth participation refers to the way in which young people function and interact in society. It encompasses their roles in the family and in the wider community, and their participation in various aspects of life, including education, the workforce, community activities and decision-making. Central to the concept of youth participation are youth empowerment and youth engagement. That is, being able to function effectively and work towards achieving their personal objectives and taking control of their lives. The obverse of youth participation is marginalisation, disempowerment and/or alienation.

Theoretical definitions of youth participation can be classified as youth-centred or adult-centred. The earliest model of participation, developed by Arnstein (1969), was a model of adult rather than youth participation, and Hart (1992, 1997) was the first to propose a model specifically for youth participation. He identified eight levels of Young People's Participation ranging from 'manipulation', which is not participation but where adults use young people to support causes in the pretence that these causes were inspired by young people, through to 'young-people initiated, shared decisions with adults' involving 'shared and equal participation that empowers youth while enabling them to learn from adult experience and expertise'. Perhaps because of its origins, is notable that this model is still adult rather than youth centred, focussing on the varying roles adults play in relation to children's participation and children's responses, rather than on the nature of the actual participation.

Subsequent theoretical models by Treseder (1997), Lardner (2001) and Shier (2001) recognised the need for child-centred definitions. The model proposed by The Concerned for Working Children (2002), is particularly appealing because it portrays ways of interacting rather than particular situations. It is described as "*a spiralling partnership in which constructive interactions of adults and youth (or children) benefit both parties by building interdependence while allowing the young people to emerge as stronger individuals*" (The Concerned for Working Children, 2002). It aims to create an open, friendly and supportive relationship between young people and their families and communities - a practical translation of rights as set out under CRC (United Nations, 1989) and the declaration on human rights (United Nations, 1948). The elements and characteristics of this partnership are listed and applied to the Pacific in the following section.

Most Pacific signatories to CRC are currently making efforts to comply by ensuring the basic provision of services and care and protection of children and youth. In addition to providing health and education services, which absorb substantial percentages of all national budgets, some countries have initiated reviews of other child rights, including practices and legislation relating to child protection, juvenile justice and corporal punishment. The Articles relating to participation and the voice of the child, however, including the right to hold an opinion and to freedom of

expression and thought (Articles 12-14, United Nations, 1989) have proved most contentious and most often ignored. Possible explanations for this are that increasing youth participation at the family level means a change in mindset and parenting methods, while at the community level there are few existing mechanisms for youth participation. Moreover, although CRC defends the child's right to culture and mother tongue, community leaders tend to perceive youth participation as inconsistent with tradition. Often they have difficulty envisioning how the concept might work, and lack a good appreciation of how youth participation can improve decision-making for the benefit of the whole community.

Most promotion of child and youth participation by international agencies has been rights based, rather than specifically to reduce high-risk behaviour in youth (see extensive bibliography in Save the Children, 2006). Although there are obvious linkages between participation, empowerment and self-esteem, improving self-esteem does not necessarily prevent high-risk behaviour, and there are few studies of this association. Because it has many causes, high-risk behaviour occurs across all strata of society, in more and less developed countries, and among those with various levels of self-esteem. The lack of a demonstrable association between participation and responsible behaviour could be a factor undermining commitment to youth participation among Pacific leaders.

What is clear, however, is that youth with low self-esteem are particularly vulnerable to engaging in high-risk behaviour because they lack alternative outlets. In contrast, youth with higher self-esteem are more likely to limit high-risk behaviour to levels that do not restrict their options and choices.

One experiment that did demonstrate the effectiveness of empowerment and increased self-esteem in reducing delinquent behaviour was the Machismo Project that empowered delinquent youth in an Australian secondary school (Makruun, 2000). I found another excellent example when I visited the Tuvalu Marine Training Institute (TMTI). Three randomly selected students told me about their life before TMTI. All three had lost interest in white-collar oriented education, failed an exam, rebelled with high-risk behaviour and had not completed their secondary education. After a year at TMTI receiving an education that suited their interests and personalities and promised a lucrative career as a seafarer, all three were firmly back on track and complying with strict maritime discipline. One who had been expelled from secondary school for disruptive behaviour said he had played up in class because he hated the subject matter, especially maths. I asked how he had managed to complete the engineering part of his marine training when he hated maths so much. 'Oh I can do maths OK when I want to,' he replied.

#### *4.2 Enabling and disabling factors in the Pacific*

It is very important to recognise that although many issues for Pacific youth arise from social marginalisation, disempowerment and alienation, these attributes do not apply to all aspects of their lives. There are both enabling and disabling factors in Pacific society, and attributes such as social cohesiveness can work both ways, depending what other factors come into play in a particular situation. Pacific youth play a vital role in society as unpaid domestic help. As young children they care for domestic animals, sweep and tidy house surrounds and fetch water. They progress to caring for each other and undertaking increasingly demanding chores. What is in question as regards youth participation in the Pacific is not their role in society *per se*, but that youth tend to be disempowered and do not have a voice in decision-making processes, including decisions that affect their own lives.

Communication is facilitated by close-knit societies where no one is alone, everyone is known to everyone else and people regularly come together for meetings and entertainment. Drama groups involving youth such as Wan Smolbag in Vanuatu, Youth-to-Youth-in-Health in Marshall Islands and Women's Action for Change in Fiji have made good use of this aspect of village life to present education on health and social issues. Young performers are readily accepted, and people value and enjoy the entertainment they provide. Save the Children and UNICEF's Pacific Children's Program also involve existing community structures in the implementation of projects to benefit communities.

While drama is one of only a few avenues that enable the transfer of information from young to old, the social hierarchy can constitute a disabling factor. For example, the Solomon Islands youth group 'Winds of Change' was deployed to provide civic awareness and education in democratic rights prior to the April 2006 Solomon Islands election. Although young people were perfectly able to go into rural communities and discuss these topics, many adults did not think it appropriate for youth to be instructing them on these matters so did not take the campaign seriously (Personal communications, Solomon Islands April-May 2006). Similarly, peer educators in Fiji reported that nurses in some rural health centres would not permit them to provide reproductive health information to clients, because the nurses thought it inappropriate for youth to discuss such matters. These examples demonstrate that changing adult perceptions of youth participation could bring benefits to the wider community.

Another potential disabling factor for strategies to increase youth participation is that they may become tokenistic or their objectives may not prioritise free expression by young people. Sometimes this is because nature and limitations of particular activities are not recognised and it is assumed that they will achieve more than is possible. For example, while Youth Parliaments are extremely valuable, practical strategies for teaching youth about parliamentary processes and the nature of debate, they may have only limited value as avenues for youth to express their views. The topics debated in Fiji's first two Youth Parliaments in 2002 and 2004 were selected by the organisers and most of the delegates were students and out-of-school youth who were required to follow a set agenda (Fiji, Ministry of Youth Employment Opportunities and Sports, 2002 and 2004). While participants had the opportunity to research and speak on topics of national importance, and this undoubtedly boosted their confidence and self-esteem, these Youth Parliaments were not the democratic forums implied by their name, and the youth contributions did not inform any development agenda. In this instance, using an appropriate mechanism in an adult-defined rather than a participatory, youth-centred manner constrained its effectiveness.

An unavoidable structural limitation of official mechanisms for youth participation relates to selection of delegates. The most articulate young people who are most likely to be elected to represent their peers are most often those from privileged backgrounds and convenient locations. Inevitably youth in remote and outlying areas are more likely to be by-passed or under-represented because they are less likely to be articulate and familiar with national issues and programs of action. While most youth delegates are very diligent about canvassing and representing their peers, ongoing efforts are needed to make youth representation as democratic as possible. In proportion to the youth population, only a very small percentage of young people have benefited through participatory initiatives.

Whereas formal presentations tend to be taken seriously by the community, informal strategies to enhance youth participation, such as phone-in discussions, are

sometimes less well accepted by adults, even though they may provide a vital service for youth and the only source of information for some. For example, a peer educator in Kiribati who uses a radio phone-in session to answer young people's questions on reproductive health reported that adults sometimes phone in to complain (Personal communication, 2005).

An example of a communication activity that benefited from formal planning while retaining a youthful informality was Fiji's Youth-e-media. Youth-e-media was a four-year project in the late 1990s, initially a response to the CRC campaign and geared towards UNICEF's International Children's Day of Broadcasting. It was effectively peer education via the media, backed by donor funding. Mentors taught media techniques to selected youth and encouraged them to become media advocates. The young people so trained chose their own topics and made media presentations on issues they regarded as important, including orphanages, youth living on the street, reproductive health and abuse. The professional quality of presentations and the compelling subject matter attracted much attention in the community and led Prime Minister Rabuka to meet with the youth presenters. It also helped to win support for the formation of a National Youth Advisory Board (Personal communications, 2005, 2006).

Language is an important issue in the empowerment of Pacific youth. In countries where English is an official language, exclusive use of English at youth meetings discriminates against those who have not learned English well, including most school dropouts and many students from remote areas (Personal communications, 2005). Discussion of issues should be conducted in the vernacular, even if the results of deliberations are communicated in a different language. In countries with multiple vernacular languages, strategies are needed to ensure that all youth can contribute to discussions if they wish to. The same applies to media broadcasts for youth.

Youth participation through development projects is also subject to both enabling and disabling factors. While some projects have been successful, attrition rates tend to be high and many become unsustainable. There are many reasons, but some of the most common are lack of confidence and lack of on-going support. For example, Marie Bopp, a young Pacific journalist, reported that she was involved in a project to generate income from paper recycling, but it failed when she left because her friends 'lacked confidence' (UNICEF, 1998: 12). Another example from PNG illustrates the importance of on-going support and donor responsiveness to youth needs:

*One project I was associated with was a cutting edge project, the first of its kind in PNG. Initially support came from a major donor. As we were young people who lacked experience and skills, they promised ongoing technical support. A consultant helped us to start off and when she left we were fine for some months, but then nothing. They left like a bubble in the air with no structure or entity. My friends and I worked so hard to sustain the project for the next two years and finally registered it as an NGO. At that point the donor walked into our office and took back all the office equipment they had originally given us and accused us of mismanagement. What a struggle! ... We don't care what they have done as the youth project is still surviving on the scraps we started with. But it's a terrible situation when donors want things to be done their way and when we young people want it our way everything is withdrawn from us... That's not the way things should be.*

Source: Email from Pacific Youth Summit for MDGs participant

When participatory activities for youth are planned, whether by adults or by youth, all the potentially enabling and disabling factors need to be assessed, including any

specific local factors that could impact the project. Without this essential preparation their effectiveness is likely to be limited. This example also highlights the importance of including capacity building in youth projects so that activities become sustainable.

Carling (2006) observes that while there have been some recent examples of effective and meaningful youth participation, progress has not yet been comprehensive or coordinated. Agencies often work in isolation from each other and use the same group of participants in different initiatives, which is not good for the larger youth population. A multi-faceted, coordinated approach is needed to enhance participation in a broad spectrum of community activities, not just appropriate education and the labour force. An essential part of this is a change in community attitudes to youth, to enable partnering and full youth participation.

## **5. Increasing youth participation in the Pacific**

### *5.1. The Implications of youth participation in the family and community*

As discussed above, The Concerned for Working Children (2002) have proposed a 'spiralling partnership' model of youth participation. The elements of this model are:

- openness
- mutual respect and trust
- freedom of expression
- sensitivity
- affection
- commitment
- understanding
- mutual support
- empowering
- friendship
- negotiation
- flexibility
- sharing
- mutual accountability
- sharing of rights and responsibilities
- joyful
- agreeing to disagree when necessary
- challenging
- acceptance of each other's reality
- a shared vision
- listening to each other
- not being manipulative

*(The Concerned for Working Children, 2002).*

Let's consider what implementing this 'spiralling partnership' might mean for a young person in the Pacific. At the family level, and taking into account differing family economic circumstances, it would mean that young people were protected and given the best possible care, permitted as much choice as possible, encouraged to have ambitions and supported in their efforts to achieve these ambitions. Their efforts and achievements would always be appreciated, and they would be treated in a friendly manner as people who have something worthwhile to contribute to society. Young people would be free to express their own opinions and to ask questions about anything at all. Parents would always do their best to give honest answers; teach their children why it is dangerous to engage in high-risk behaviours; and teach them how to negotiate and manage them. When young people do make mistakes or find the pressure to engage in high-risk behaviours irresistible, their parents do not inflict

severe physical punishment but counsel them and help them deal with the outcomes and get their lives back on track rather than simply inflicting severe punishment.

Such relationships seem to be uncommon in Pacific families (Adinkrah, 1995; Save the Children, 2005). The principle factor that tends to work against them is rigidly hierarchical relationships. Hierarchical families are by no means unique to the Pacific and were the backbone of most pre-modern societies. What is perhaps different in the Pacific is the extent to which they have persisted in the presence of modernity. When confronted by new challenges in child-raising, Pacific parents tend to become increasingly strict rather than adopting more flexible, partnering approaches. This dependence on traditional discipline - especially corporal punishment - is encapsulated in the attitude of a group of Tokelauan women who attributed the recent increase in adolescent problems on their atoll to the adoption by some parents and teachers of CRC's prohibition on corporal punishment. This points to the importance of providing more information about alternative approaches to child rearing and positive discipline and the mechanisms for imparting it.

At the community level, a young-person-centred, partnering approach to youth participation would mean that youth organizations were respected and given opportunities to express their views at community consultations, and opportunities would be provided for youth to participate as equals in community activities and the workforce. In addition, efforts would be made to provide youth with safe sports and recreational facilities. Youth would be encouraged to develop skills, and their sincere efforts would always be appreciated and respected, regardless of the quality of output. They would never be manipulated for the benefit of adult society.

Adopting a young-person-centred, partnering approach would not mean discarding traditional cultural values. Most Pacific Island youth seem to place high value their traditional culture, and seem no less eager to preserve it than are their parents. For example, 81 per cent of youth interviewed on the streets of Port Vila saw *kastom* as important. Their reasons related directly to self-esteem and also to the economic potential of *kastom* 'Because custom and culture is my identity – who I am and where I come from.' 'You don't need money to learn it or to take part in it' 'Because there isn't work, so learning *kastom* is one way to make money' (Mitchell, 1998: 21).

Managing traditional and modern cultures simultaneously includes recognising that culture evolves and can adapt to accommodate new values, such as rights for children and women. 'The challenge is to find ways to celebrate the resilience and innovation in Pacific young people, not to advocate for "culture as an artefact" to be held onto blindly. As one young person said to me in a workshop "I know who I am as a Fijian, and tomorrow I will still know that, but I can still be different from my parents"' (Comment from WAC, Fiji, 2005).

Adults and elders as well as youth I have interviewed in various Pacific countries seem comfortable with the process of cultural adaptation and do not necessarily see it as undermining. For example, stakeholders interviewed in Tuvalu in August 2006 commented that their culture is always changing and it is only a matter of time before more rights are accorded to women and youth. Perhaps it is the rapid pace of change that elders tend to find threatening rather than the fact that change will eventually occur.

## 5.2 *Implications of youth participation for employment and income generation*

Increasing youth employment and income generation has the potential to bring great benefits in the form of greater utilisation of human resources and increased national productivity, while at the same time reducing the dependency burden. In the

distorted, public-sector-dominated economies that predominate in the Pacific, however, where employment and entrepreneurial opportunities are scarce, youth must compete with older workers.

Economists emphasise development of the private sector to create more opportunities for youth and older workers alike (e.g. Duncan, 2005), but equally important are provision of TVET in schools and a change in community attitude towards youth participation. While the importance of providing more choice in education has been widely recognised, and most countries are now introducing more TVET, this is a costly process and it will be some years before every Pacific student will have access to appropriate education for the job market or for income generation.

Communities also need to recognise that they can benefit from supporting youth initiative and enterprise. The Tonga Young Farmers' Project is an example of exchange of agricultural information helping both young farmers and their village-based mentors. The young farmers tell their village-based mentors about modern farming techniques they have learned in school, while the mentors train the young farmers in practical aspects of cultivation. This builds mutual respect between the generations and increases youth self-esteem while improving output in the agricultural sector (Personal communication, Tonga Young Farmers, 2005).

Some of the most effective examples of self-employment and income generation projects among Pacific youth have been sponsored by religious organizations that provide strict supervision and strong support for work activities, while emphasising spiritual development. An example is the Marist Training Centre in Tutu, Fiji, which emphasises the empowerment of young people. Seventeen graduates of its young farmers' course '*collectively amassed a total asset of \$FJ 1,434,106 during their three years of training*'. Their strategies included growing and selling *yagona*, buying a chainsaw with the proceeds and building houses with the chainsaw and the skills they had learned (Fiji Ministry for Education, Youth and Sports, 1999). This project included the two key elements of any strategy to help youth help themselves: funding to enable the purchase of tools and materials and on-going support and advice.

Also vital is management support for youth enterprises. The Solomon Islands Small Business Enterprise Centre was established to provide training and advice for small enterprise, including advice on how to resist pressure from *wantoks* to share rather than re-invest business profits, a common cause of business failure in Melanesia (McCutchan, 2005a: 28). One youth enterprise that has received support from the Centre is a successful furniture business established by a former high school dropout. After completing some short courses in the Solomon Islands College of Higher Education's School of Finance, he spent six years working for furniture companies and learning about furniture manufacture. In 2002 he set up a business with capital of \$50.00 and by 2005 was employing 15 people (McCutchan, 2005b: 30). Another example of business support can be found in the Cook Islands, where a village youth leader who manages a small, AusAID-funded enterprise has trained many of his peers to go into small businesses, providing them with the basic skills to set up and run a small business (Email from Pacific Youth Summit for MDGs participant).

Greater engagement of youth in economic strategies can also contribute to positive change. For this to happen, however, it is essential to ensure that participation is meaningful rather than simply tokenistic. For example, the Fiji Young Entrepreneurs Association has been invited to participate in the budget and other national policy dialogue since its launch by the Prime Minister in 2003. Although "*they are probably more attuned and switched on to development issues and the workings of*

*government and donors than most youth NGOs, they have hardly been able to influence changes that are pro-youth business... Perhaps we should be asking if governments really take youth seriously enough ... There is a fundamental breakdown in the process of translating policies into well-targeted strategies and programmes on the ground” (Email from Carol Flores, UNDP, to YSFP, July 2006).*

Sometimes youth are more able to recognise potential economic opportunities than are the organizations that assist them. For example, according to one young man who has lived on Suva’s streets, the main reason why youth stay there is that several agencies provide meals for them. He believes that if donors helped homeless youth find ways of earning an income instead of feeding them youth would not stay on the streets (UNICEF, 2005: 48).

### *5.3 Implications of youth participation in governance structures*

As discussed above, the hierarchical nature of Pacific societies mean that the concept of youth participation in governance is alien or even regarded as unrealistic in Pacific communities. Few understand that it can improve the flow of information within communities and lead to improved decision-making, without reducing respect for elders. Education and use of the Internet mean that youth are tending to have a greater understanding and more information of relevance to development and modernity than do some older members of the community. A change in attitude to youth participation could allow societies to benefit from this, along with other youth capacities.

When the topic of child participation was raised with government, NGO and youth representatives in Tuvalu in August 2006 an elder pointed out that youth already have the right to attend meetings of councils of elders, but they seldom come. Others pointed out that this was probably because they are not permitted to speak unless representation on a specific issue is requested, and they are not permitted to vote on community affairs. The elder argued that this is no excuse, and disparaged young people as lacking interest and commitment. In his view they should attend all meetings and sit and learn wisdom from their elders, as he said he had done when he was a boy. Since the elders govern the society, younger adults who perceive this approach as limited and advocate greater youth participation have no capacity to change the system.

To date most efforts to involve youth in decision-making have tended focussed on decisions that affect youth themselves, such as canvassing youth views on national youth policy. The strongest youth organizations within the Pacific tend to be the National Youth Councils, because they have community recognition and, usually, strong links with the ministries or departments concerned with youth affairs. The 4<sup>th</sup> Marshall Islands Youth Congress Conference of July 2005 is a good example of use of participatory research methods to obtain input into the National Youth Policy. In some countries youth are invited to comment on wider national policy, e.g. Tokelau’s devolution of government (Government of Tokelau and UNICEF, forthcoming).

Fiji’s National Youth Advisory Board (NYAB) is an example of a consultative mechanism for youth participation at the highest levels of governance. The Board was established to provide direct youth input into national policy via regular meetings with politicians, including the Minister for Youth. Although only two meetings have been held and the agenda has tended to be set by officials rather than the youth representatives, this is a model of youth participation in governance that could be improved and adopted elsewhere to bring benefits to both youth and the wider community. In New Zealand, for example, a Children’s Commissioner meets

regularly to receive inputs from a youth advisory board on a wide range of issues raised by youth, the community and government (UNICEF, forthcoming).

#### *5.4 Some examples of best practice in youth participation*

Although there are still relatively few examples of effective youth participation in the Pacific, some of those that have succeeded provide excellent models. The Pacific Youth Summit for Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) held in Apia in May 2005 is one of the best examples of an effective strategy to give youth a voice on national and regional issues. The event was initiated by young members of Youth for Sustainable Futures Pacifika (YSFP), a group formed by young people who had attended the Youth Visioning For Island Living meeting in Mauritius and/or the World Youth Congress. A strength of the Apia meeting was donor cooperation, with UNDP Samoa facilitating and contributions and co-funding from UNESCO, UNICEF, WHO and UNAIDS and Samoa's Ministry of Women, Community and Social Development. Young people took the lead in planning the MDG Summit, setting the agenda and facilitation, and efforts were made to ensure that the delegations attending the meeting comprised dynamic young people who had the capacity and connections to ensure follow up.

The purpose of the meeting was to enable youth input to two major regional initiatives, National Plans of Action for MDGs and the Pacific Islands Forum Leaders' Pacific Plan. Delegates discussed, identified and prioritised issues, preparing communiqués on both topics before the end of the meeting. The two communiqués were forwarded to National MDGs Committees and the Pacific Plan Team at the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, and were taken into account in final drafting of the latter. They have also been circulated at several regional meetings and referenced in a number of regional publications. Both have been used as background papers for the formulation of the Pacific Plan and various youth policies (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2005; UNDP et al., 2005a, 2005b).

Since the Apia meeting, there has been much daily email contact between YSFP members, and YSFP has obtained some small-project funding, with further funding likely. At present YSFP has World Bank support to undertake qualitative and quantitative research on youth participation in six Pacific countries. It is one of the few initiatives in the Region where youth are researching youth, and can be expected to produce important insights into young people's aspirations and perceptions of issues.

The success of YSFP can be attributed to four factors in particular. First, it is entirely youth driven and its core members have tremendous initiative, commitment and ability to network with other young people. Second, they have received high levels of recognition and support from donors, and have the persistence and determination to win more. Third, frequent email exchanges give group members support and a perspective on life outside their immediate community, and encourages them to cooperate and initiate projects. Fourth, it supports and builds local capacity by providing assistance with project proposals and developing and distributing kits on how youth can lead initiatives.

To date few Pacific youth activities have been as successful as those of YSFP, largely because of disabling factors within their own communities. The founding members of YSFP were based in Australia, so they were free of the traditional social constraints that can beset youth organizations within the Region. For example, NGOs within the region must work through coordinating bodies or governments, which puts youth NGOs into competition with groups run by more experienced people. On the other hand, if they are not formalised, youth groups may not qualify for donor funds.

Perhaps the best strategy for indigenous youth groups is to operate under the umbrella of supportive, strongly established NGOs that are prepared to priorities youth activities, such as Save the Children.

The Marshall Islands provides one of the best examples of a youth project that is winning respect for youth by building and strengthening links between youth and the community and younger and older generations. 'Waan Aelon in Majel' (WAM) is a donor-funded project that has trained 46 young people in outrigger canoe building, boat maintenance and repair, sailing and navigation - skills that are relevant to both current economic opportunities and traditional life in Marshall Islands. The original trainees were male school dropouts who were previously involved in high-risk activities such as substance abuse and petty crime, but several girls have now joined the program. Trainees market their work and generate income, speak in schools, bring children to observe activities such as boat building and involve parents and the community in sailing regattas. As of the end of 2004, WAM activities had reached out to 4800 students. A follow up survey of alumni found that 76 per cent of the trainees were utilising the hands-on and life skills they had gained during the program, while some had returned to their home islands or had undertaken further study (WAM, 2005).

It is particularly interesting to observe the impact of this participation on the lives of the trainees. An evaluation of WAM reported that most trainees believed...

*'the quality of their interaction with family members had improved dramatically. Many said they are more respectful of their parents and more helpful at home. Significantly, they also reported that their parent's views about them had changed and that family members showed interest and pride in their work. In terms of behavioural changes, participants reported that they no longer "run around" and get into trouble in their communities. They also reported consuming much less alcohol. Many said they had changed peer groups and are better able to handle pressure from friends and girlfriends. Their status in the community has changed too; "people know me and respect me now". One of the most significant changes reported by all alumni was in the area of improved self-worth and cultural pride. The process of building traditional canoes has changed their lives. These young people say they now feel good about "being Marshallese" and have much greater understanding and respect for their culture. They talked about spending more time with their grandparents and being interested in "the old stories"; their memories of customs they heard as young boys are returning. Traditional leaders talk to them now and are interested in what they are doing. They strongly believe Marshallese culture must be maintained and passed on to the next generation.'*

(WAM Draft Project document (2005: 8) quoting ADB Youth Social Services Project Interim Report, March 2005).

## **6. Conclusion: A multi-faceted approach to youth participation**

*"Problems young people face today should be important considerations in the planning and implementation of national development policies, because the ways in which they are addressed will influence current social and economic conditions. Their problems are, after all, merely reflections of larger social issues". (Tangata Vainerere, Pacific Youth Bureau, SPC)*

Enhancing youth participation in the Pacific Region is much more than simply according youth their rights; it is also an essential development strategy. Alienation and marginalisation of youth and failing to equip them with life and work skills has

already cost some communities and many young people dearly. In countries such as PNG and Solomon Islands, for example, constructive youth engagement is an essential part of the solution to economic and social problems, while every community in the Pacific would benefit from partnering with youth in development. An essential component is giving youth a voice as well as an economic role. Youth participation will only come about and become sustainable if parents and education systems nurture children in a participatory environment and accord them their rights. This includes using participatory teaching methods and supporting and promoting youth networks.

Achieving youth participation is not a simple process. For example, a review of a Save the Children project to enhance child participation in Vietnam found that, despite their commitment, both project staff and the community had an incomplete understanding of the issues and how to achieve the project objectives. Among the recommendations of the review were that capacity building in children's participation should be institutionalised and de-personalised (Save the Children, 2006).

Discussion participants at the UNICEF Pacific meeting on Child Rights and Culture in the Pacific (Suva, 30<sup>th</sup> October, 2006) focussed on strategies donors can use to promote youth participation. They emphasised the importance of adopting a multi-faceted approach and forming a three-cornered partnership of Governments, NGOs and the community, including youth. The approach must be to listen to youth and identify the causes of their problems rather than to regard youth as the problem. Youth capacity should be built wherever possible, such as by employing youth counterparts to advisers and project managers so that skills are transferred. Since volunteers have low status in the eyes of the community, youth participants should always be properly paid rather than expected to be volunteers.

Pacific donors need to recognise that community attitudes change slowly and it is vital to use appropriate approaches that are respectful of culture and traditional social order. They must be actively and vigorously 'sell' the idea of youth participation to communities, while at the same time recognising that participation cannot be achieved overnight. Authoritarian parents take time to learn to listen to their children's views, and need access to information about child rights and alternatives to physical discipline. From the outset traditional and church leaders should be involved in innovative projects, because their attitudes shape those of the community. For example, a former youth officer from a remote rural area of Vanuatu explained how it had taken two or three years for his community to adjust to a new strategy for youth and develop a sense of ownership and obligation to youth projects. The on-going presence of the youth officer gave continuity and facilitated this essential period of preparation. Without this period of time for attitudinal change and acceptance, the project activities could not have succeeded, but in this case an effective government/donor/ NGO partnership made it possible (Personal communication, 2005).

Participants in the Suva meeting advocated a long-term planning approach to enhancing youth participation, and said it is important to demonstrate the costs and benefits to communities. Comparing scenarios of the long-term costs of excluding youth with scenarios showing the benefits to the community of including them make powerful arguments for increased youth participation. This should be accompanied by immediate concrete action establishing mechanisms for youth involvement and encouraging youth to initiate their own participatory mechanisms such as phone and Internet networks and help-lines.

Political and financial commitment is needed to ensure sustainability in the long-term. Effective and sustainable budgeting processes must be implemented; advocacy and

negotiating skills among youth, youth departments and NGOs must be strengthened; innovative approaches to youth education and employment must be adopted; strategies must be formulated to address the institutional weakness of youth-based organizations; and mechanisms and commitment is required to ensure that youth recommendations are acted upon and incorporated into policy (Save the Children, 2006).

It is also essential to gather good information about youth needs, youth attitudes and how best to interact with youth and engage them in development. As pointed out by YSFP in a recent project proposal:

- Little is known about what youth engagement is and how to do it;
  - Little is known about whether it is effective or how to make it effective;
  - Little if any theoretical analysis and research has been done on this topic; and
  - There is not much understanding of different models of youth engagement or sharing of information on how it is being implemented by different institutions.
- (Unpublished document, YSFP, 2006).

Research from other countries may provide a guide, but it is not sufficient because effective youth participation is not an absolute. Rather, it is participation that is perceived as effective by the youth involved. Strategies must therefore begin by finding out what participation means to the particular groups or individuals targeted. This means community-specific, participatory research, which may be best done by youth themselves.

These are some of the many elements of an effective strategy to promote youth participation. Only an approach that is multi-faceted in all respects - actors, strategies and level of operation - collaborative, and backed with political and financial commitment can transform youth participation into a Pacific a reality and a key component of effective development strategies.

## REFERENCES

- ADB, 2004, *Priorities of the People: Hardship in the Kingdom of Tonga*, Manila: ADB.
- Adinkrah, M., 1995 *Crime, Deviance and Delinquency in Fiji*. Suva: Fiji Council of Social Services
- Arnstein, S., 1969, *A Ladder of Participation*, Journal of American Institute of Planners 35, 1969, pp. 216-224.
- AusAID, forthcoming, Report on the Solomon Islands People's Survey. Canberra: AusAID
- Carling, M., 2005, 'Achieving Youth Visions', UNICEF Concept Paper, Fiji:UNICEF.
- Carling, M., 2006, 'Winds of Change: The Role of Adolescents in Pacific Island Development'. UNICEF Pacific.
- Carr, M.B. and Vandiver, T.A., 2001, 'Risk and Protective Factors among youth offenders' *Adolescence*, Fall, [http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m2248/is\\_143\\_36/ai\\_82535314/](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2248/is_143_36/ai_82535314/).
- Chand, S. and T. Levantis, 1998, 'The nexus between crime and productivity in Papua New Guinea' in S. Chand (ed) *Productivity Performance in the South Pacific*, National Centre for Development Studies, Pacific Policy Paper 31, Canberra: Asia Pacific Press, pp 33-46.
- Donley, A. and Keen, B. 2000, *Self-Esteem*. <http://www.notmykid.org>.
- Duncan, R. 2004, 'The Fiji economy: needing a better investment environment', Paper presented to the 17th Australia Fiji Business Forum, "Fiji and Australia: New Economy Partners", Gold Coast, Australia, 17-19 October.
- Ecumenical Council for Research, Education and Advocacy (ECREA) 2002, *Listening to Youth*. Suva: ECREA.
- Fiji, Ministry of Education, 2005, 'Future Directions of TVET in Fiji.' Paper presented at the Forum Education Ministers meeting, Apia, 23-24 May.
- Fiji, Ministry of Youth, for Education, Youth and Sports, 1999, in *Regional Seminar on Non-Formal Education: Summary Record*, Port Vila, Vanuatu, 13-16 October. Port Vila: Government of Vanuatu, pp. 226-238.
- Fiji, Ministry of Youth Employment Opportunities and Sports, 2002, *National Youth Parliament 2004 Report*. Suva: Ministry of Youth Employment Opportunities and Sports.
- Fiji, Ministry of Youth Employment Opportunities and Sports, 2004, *National Youth Parliament 2004 Report*. Suva: Ministry of Youth Employment Opportunities and Sports.
- Fisk, E.K., 1978, *The Adaptation of Traditional Systems of Agriculture*, Development Studies Centre Monograph No. 11. Canberra: The Australian National University.
- Government of Tokelau and UNICEF, forthcoming, *Situation Analysis of Children, Youth and Women in Tokelau*. Suva: UNICEF
- Government of Tuvalu and UNICEF, forthcoming, *Situation Analysis of Children, Youth and Women in Tuvalu*. Suva: UNICEF.
- Hart, R., 1992, 'Children's participation - From Tokenism to Citizenship', *Innocenti Reports*, UNICEF.
- Hart, Roger, 1997, *The Theory and Practice of involving young citizens in Community Development and Environmental Care*, Earthscan.
- Hezel, F.X., 2001, *The New Shape of Old Island Cultures: A half century of social change in Micronesia*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Hooper, A., 2000, 'Introduction' in Hooper A. (ed) *Culture and Sustainable Development in the Pacific*, Asia Pacific Press, National Centre for Development Studies, Canberra: The Australian National University, p.1-21.
- Lardner, C., 2001, 'Youth Participation — A new model', <http://www.lardner.demon.co.uk>.
- Maakrun, A-M., 2000, 'The Machismo Project: Empowering boys and engaging them back into learning and their community'. <http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/edt/Eofb/subs/sub63.pdf>
- McCutchan, A., 2005a, 'Growing local entrepreneurs: A survival technique', *Solomons*, No. 42, pp. 28-29.
- McCutchan, A., 2005b, 'A Success Story: Robert Lui's Timeless Furniture', *Solomons*, No. 42, pp. 30-32.
- Mitchell, J., 1998, *Young People Speak...: A report on the Vanuatu Young People's Project*. Port Vila: Vanuatu Cultural Centre

- Mosley, J., 1995, *Poverty, Welfare Receipt and Adolescent Self-Esteem*. Center for Demography and Ecology NSFH Working Paper No. 69, Madison: University of Wisconsin, Madison.
- PAHP (Pacific Action for Health) 2001a, 'Substance abuse in Vanuatu'. Unpublished baseline study. Noumea: Secretariat of the Pacific Community.
- PAHP (Pacific Action for Health) 2001b, 'Substance abuse in Kiribati'. Unpublished baseline study. Noumea: Secretariat of the Pacific Community.
- PAHP (Pacific Action for Health) 2003, 'Kingdom of Tonga Qualitative Study of Youth Substance Abuse'. Unpublished baseline study. Noumea: Secretariat of the Pacific Community.
- Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2001, *Forum Basic Education Action Plan - 2001, Auckland, New Zealand*. Suva: Forum Secretariat.
- Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2005, *The Pacific Plan*, Suva: Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat.
- RRRT (Regional Rights Resources Team) and UNICEF, 2004, *Situation Analysis of Child Abuse and Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in Kiribati*, Unpublished report. Suva: RRRT and UNICEF
- RRRT (Regional Rights Resources Team) and UNICEF, 2004, *Situation Analysis of Child Abuse and Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in Solomon Islands*. Unpublished report. Suva: RRRT and UNICEF
- RRRT (Regional Rights Resources Team) and UNICEF, 2004, *Situation Analysis of Child Abuse and Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in Vanuatu*. Unpublished report. Suva: RRRT and UNICEF
- Save the Children Sweden, 2005, *Discipline and punishment of children: a rights-based review of laws, attitudes and practices in East Asia and the Pacific*. Bangkok: Save the Children.
- Save the Children Sweden, 2006, *Creating an enabling environment: Capacity building in children's participation, Viet Nam, 2000-2004*. Bangkok: Save the Children.
- Shier, H., 2001, 'Pathways to Participation: Openings, Opportunities and Obligations', *Children and Society*, Vol. 15, pp107-111.
- SPC (Secretariat of the Pacific Community), 2006, *Population Data Sheet*, <http://www.spc.int/demog>
- The Concerned for Working Children. 2002, *A Journey In Children's Participation. Vimanapura, Bangalore, India*. [www.workingchild.org](http://www.workingchild.org).
- Treseder, P., 1997, *Empowering Children and Young People*, Training Manual, Save the Children Fund, London.
- UNDP, 1999, *Pacific Human Development Report 1999, Creating Opportunities*, Suva: UNDP.
- UNDP, 2005, *Pacific Human Development Report 2005*, Suva: UNDP.
- UNDP, UNESCO, UNICEF, WHO, UNAIDS and Ministry of Women, Community and Social Development, Government of Samoa, 2005a, 'Tofamamao Pacific 2015: Declaration of the Pacific Youth Summit for MDGs, 12 May. Apia, Samoa'.
- UNDP, UNESCO, UNICEF, WHO, UNAIDS and Ministry of Women, Community and Social Development, Government of Samoa. 2005b, 'Youth Statement on the Pacific Plan', Pacific Youth Summit for MDGs, 12 May. Apia, Samoa'.
- UNICEF. 1998. *The State of Pacific Youth 1998*. Suva: UNICEF.
- UNICEF, 2004, Pacific Regional Conference on Early Childhood Development. Suva: UNICEF.
- UNICEF, forthcoming, *Report on the Pacific Consultation on Addressing Violence Against Children*. Suva: UNICEF.
- UNICEF and AusAID, 1998, *Kilim Taem*. (Video).
- UNICEF, SPC and UNFPA, 2005, *The State of Pacific Youth 2005*. Suva: UNICEF
- United Nations, 1948, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. New York: United Nations. <http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html>
- United Nations, 1989, *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. New York: United Nations General Assembly.
- United Nations, 1989, *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women*. New York: United Nations General Assembly.
- Vainerere, T. 2001, 'Prevailing challenges for Pacific youth', *Development Bulletin* 56 28, October.

WAM (Waan Aelon in Majel), 2005, *Project Description and Draft Strategic Plan 2005-2009*.  
Majuro, Marshall Islands: Waan Aelon in Majel Project.  
YSFP, 2006, Unpublished project proposal.

**Table 1 : Youth Population in Pacific Island Countries**

Region/country or territory	Last census	Population as counted at last census	Mid-year population estimate 2005	Mid-year population estimate 2015	Estimated annual pop. Growth rate 2004-2015 (%)	Median age	Number aged 15-24	Percentage aged 15-24	Annual growth rate of ages 15-24 (%)	Estimated number aged 15-24 in 2015
Cook Islands	2001	18,027	13,819	n.a. <sup>1</sup>	n.a. <sup>1</sup>	25.3	2,178	15.8	n.a. <sup>1</sup>	n.a. <sup>1</sup>
Federated States of Micronesia	2000	107,008	114,093	129,000	1.2	18.9	24,415	21.4	-0.1	24,275
Fiji Islands	1996	775,077	832,700	891,100	0.7	21.2	163,368	19.6	-0.7	151,774
Kiribati	2000	84,494	95,252	119,700	2.3	19.7	19,300	20.3	1.7	22,795
Marshall Islands	1999	50,840	56,297	66,100	1.6	17.8	11,192	19.9	-1.2	9,899
Nauru	2002	10,065	10,204	n.a. <sup>1</sup>	n.a. <sup>1</sup>	20.7	2,004	19.6	n.a. <sup>1</sup>	n.a. <sup>1</sup>
Niue	2001	1,788	1,540	n.a. <sup>1</sup>	n.a. <sup>1</sup>	29.0	237	15.4	n.a. <sup>1</sup>	n.a. <sup>1</sup>
Palau	2000	19,129	21,118	n.a. <sup>1</sup>	n.a. <sup>1</sup>	30.8	2,948	14.0	n.a. <sup>1</sup>	n.a. <sup>1</sup>
Papua New Guinea	2000	5,190,786	5,821,419	7,236,200	2.2	19.7	1,133,969	19.5	2.4	1,440,771
Samoa	2001	176,710	184,367	201,900	0.9	19.7	32,719	17.7	2.1	40,414
Solomon Islands	1999	409,042	470,805	589,700	2.3	18.8	97,243	20.7	1.8	116,547
Tokelau	2001	1,537	1,500	n.a. <sup>1</sup>	n.a. <sup>1</sup>	19.9	225	15.0	n.a. <sup>1</sup>	n.a. <sup>1</sup>
Tonga	1996	97,784	98,006	95,400	-0.3	19.9	20,005	20.4	-1.2	17,663
Tuvalu	2002	9,561	9,636	n.a. <sup>1</sup>	n.a. <sup>1</sup>	23.7	1,661	17.2	n.a. <sup>1</sup>	n.a. <sup>1</sup>
Vanuatu	1999	186,678	221,635	289,400	2.7	19.6	43,818	19.8	2.5	56,230
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>7,138,526</b>	<b>7,952,389</b>				<b>1,555,282</b>			

Source: Pacific Island Populations 2004, Secretariat of the Pacific Community

[1] No 2015 population projections are provided for small countries and territories. With international migration impacting severely on these countries, population projections in such highly volatile demographic environments would provide, at best, very poor projections. A recent population projection for Niue, for example, was based on assumptions of continued negative growth towards 2015, due to unabated emigration levels during the 1990s. Developments since cyclone Heta, however, saw Niue's population rebound, with Niue's 2005 resident population of 1,745 very similar to 2001 census data (1,788).