

Youth-Inclusive Development: Challenges and Potential in Solomon Islands

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Political discourse and parliament in Solomon Islands are dominated by older men, making it easy to forget that this cohort of influential people are, in fact, the minority of the population. With seven in 10 Solomon Islanders under age 34 (UNDP 2018:6), Solomon Islands' youth population is particularly visible on the streets of Honiara, where large groups of youth can be seen in public spaces and at events.

There are, however, few youths in positions of influence or formal decision-making structures in Solomon Islands. Youths are rarely seen in politics and government, and are less likely to be employed (Solomon Islands National Statistical Office 2014:75). This In Brief examines present exclusion of youths from decision-making and highlights where change is emerging and policy support could be most effective.

The situation of youths is shaped by economics and politics, as well as social norms that may support or obstruct their participation in these realms. The cultural diversity of Solomon Islands makes generalisations about social norms difficult, but two commonly found are that youth must obey their parents and respect their elders. Youth are often relegated to low status work as labourers (paid or unpaid) for the family, community projects and businesses. Community elders (men and women) have more status and rights to speak at public gatherings and meetings; the participation of youths in public forums is less common.

Official youth representation and participation is under the remit of the Youth Division of the Ministry of Women, Youths, Children and Family Affairs, which has historically suffered from limited resourcing. It is also difficult to track the impact of projects and policies on youth across government and encourage better coordination of government and non-government actors (Ministry of Women, Youths, Children and Family Affairs 2018:5).

The rise of constituency development funds (discretionary public funds allocated to individual members of parliament), particularly following the Tensions (civil conflict 1998–2003) has compounded the exclusion of certain groups from national politics. The practice of members of parliament playing money

politics (where voters expect cash or tangible goods in reward for votes) means that youth don't have access to either the funds or the status to demonstrate tangible benefits from their leadership and run for national office. Youth leaders, often working in partnership with chiefs and other leaders, are more likely to emerge at the local and provincial levels. For instance, there are currently people under 35 years of age who serve as members of provincial assemblies. An analysis conducted in 2016 (Ministry of Provincial Government and Institutional Strengthening/World Bank:17–19) found that young women who are able to demonstrate service to their community, have support from chiefs and are better educated are able to win support in elections as community officers (who act to solve local conflicts and link communities with government). However, this local influence has not yet translated to increased representation in governmental structures and more formal decision-making processes, such as national government committees (UNDP 2018:20–21).

The large cohort of male youths that participated in violence in the Tensions, then in a 2006 episode of civil unrest that resulted in destruction to property in Honiara, has contributed to frequent characterisation of Solomon Islands youth as 'conflict risks' in political discourse. However, this characterisation often masks the involvement of adult leaders and instigators in violent action, and can obscure the potential that lies in a youthful population.

Young people have more access to education than older generations, with access and attendance increasing dramatically in the post-conflict years. The rate of primary school completion has made significant strides since the Tensions, with attendance around 90 per cent (Solomon Islands National Statistical Office 2014:52). More people have higher levels of education than any time in Solomon Islands history (although dropping out of secondary school remains problematic, particularly for teenage mothers, who are the least likely to be in work or education).¹

Education and communication (including dramatic increases in the proportion of the population with access to mobile phones)

provide emerging opportunities for youth to engage with political discussions and civil society activities. Civil society advocacy, particularly through social media in urban areas, is contributing to an increase in some young peoples' political engagement over a variety of issues, including anti-corruption, environment and transport. For years, young women have endured a sort of invisibility, with many youth projects involving more young men than women, and many women's projects involving few young unmarried women. However, targeted programs for young girls, at least in urban and peri-urban areas, are increasing. Several youth-led organisations, particularly those led by young women in Honiara (including the Young Women's Parliamentary Group and Girls for Change) are working alongside more established local non-government organisations (NGOs) (such as the Young Women's Christian Association) to advocate young women's concerns. These groups are highlighting and attempting to tackle the double disadvantage of gender and youth that young women face when participating in public debates, advocacy and politics. Plan International has recently started research on the safety of adolescent girls in Honiara and in 2019 will be rolling out more participatory activities regarding sexual harassment and other safety concerns.

In various rural areas, youth groups are active, often organising sporting, cultural and economic activities. These groups can build trust and engagement among youths that can potentially broaden into other activities. Rural youth groups are sometimes linked into provincial government and other networks, particularly church-denominations, for funding, training and coordination of activities. These networks tend to have few interventions and support from the development sector; their reach to youth is largely limited to provincial capitals. Support for other geographic areas is needed, particularly for youth who might be vulnerable to exploitation (such as around logging and mining areas, where male youth are targeted for low-paid dangerous work, and female youth are pressured into prostitution or taken as 'logging wives').

In many parts of the islands, local community decision-making structures are inclusive of youth. For example, many councils of chiefs around the country have youth representatives in their decision-making meetings. Solomon Islands Development Trust, the oldest local NGO working nationally on development, has mandated youth representatives in village committees and activities such as participatory rural appraisal, which includes critical analysis of national and constituency level expenditure and attempts to open dialogue between rural communities and their elected leaders.

A new National Youth Policy, created following a consultative process with youth, was launched in August 2018 and

includes mechanisms for greater government coordination to achieve increased youth employment and other policy goals. It remains to be seen whether political will can be built and institutional divides overcome to achieve its aims, but the high-level attention given to it thus far, including its launch by the prime minister, is a promising start.

Conclusion

Layers of youth disadvantage, and the invisibility of young women, need an attentive response. This includes greater youth participation in research, policy and planning, mandated inclusion in decision-making processes, particular attention to the specific disadvantage of female youth, activities for youth to inform and lobby elected representatives about their concerns and youth employment and entrepreneurship programs that enable young people to obtain and sustain livelihoods. Through these actions, Solomon Islands has the potential to change the position of youth from a 'risk' to an asset.

Author notes

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Endnotes

1. Most teenage mothers (72 per cent) live with their parents, do not work and rely on others for support, according to the 2009 census (Solomon Islands National Statistical Office 2014).

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