

Prevailing challenges for Pacific youth

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It is indisputable that, given the appropriate enabling conditions, young people in any society can be both a major resource for development and key agents for social change. I constantly visualise the emergence of a new generation of young Pacific Islanders, well equipped with a clear sense of direction and purpose as they endeavour to maintain an even keel throughout the journey of transition from adolescence to adulthood. However, I am also mindful of the real and seemingly insurmountable challenges confronting them as they strive to come to terms with the many contemporary issues which are being ushered into the Pacific region by rapid socioeconomic change.

Growing concerns

The total population of the 22 member countries of the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC), formerly the South Pacific Commission, is over 8 million. Of this total, 1.5 million are young people aged 15–24 years (47 per cent females and 53 per cent males), collectively making up about 20 per cent of the Pacific population.

With a projected annual growth rate of 2.2 per cent for this age group in the region, it is anticipated that the short-term measures which need to be implemented in order to cater for the increased demand for essential social services (education, health, employment, and so on) will place more pressure on national government budgets and the meagre resources available in the private sector. Needless to say, the long-term implications if such measures are not quickly put in place will be catastrophic.

Given that scenario, the 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 as well as the well-being and livelihood of future generations. Their problems are, after all, merely reflections of larger social issues. They should therefore be addressed within the broad framework of national social, economic and political structures and with the active cooperation of young people.

Retracing past steps

Global initiatives in youth development, led by the United Nations during the International Year of Youth in 1985, highlighted the importance of direct participation by young people in the development process. However, in 1989, the Vanini Report identified a number of constraints inhibiting the progress of youth development in the Pacific region (South Pacific Commission 1991).

The report found that youth needs were still being dealt with in isolation from wider community needs. It also expressed concern at the lack of a regionally approved set of development priorities for Pacific youth to guide policy, strategies, and resource requirements with a view to providing programme quality and sensitivity to the constantly changing youth needs of member countries.

Vanini stressed the need for immediate efforts towards developing appropriate strategies to address the rapidly changing circumstances of young people in the Pacific before they became an 'unmanageable problem'. He recommended that urgent steps be taken to facilitate new action, to experiment with new strategies, to encourage innovation, and to be more forward-looking in policy in order to keep pace with a rapidly shifting target population.

The third Pacific Youth Conference, in 1994, again acknowledged that young people are an important national resource and that their training and other forms of human resource development initiatives must be regarded as an investment. The urgency of the situation in the region led to a concerted call by young people and youth workers alike for appropriate national youth policies to be put in place in all Pacific countries.

A mandate for youth development

The SPC, with headquarters in Noumea and a regional office in Suva, is a regional technical development agency that works in partnership with its members, other organisations and donors to deliver priority programmes to its member countries and territories. Its work programmes aim to develop the technical, professional, scientific, research, planning and management capability of Pacific Island people, and to directly provide information and advice that will enable them to make informed decisions about their future development and well-being.

A key SPC objective is to 'enhance the integration of critical cross-sectoral issues such as economics, gender, youth, population, culture, rural energy, community education, food security and other social development concerns into the planning and policy-formulation processes of SPC's member governments and administrations'.

The Pacific Youth Resource Bureau (PYRB), one of several SPC programmes, was officially launched on 1 June 1998 with the mandate of coordinating implementation of the Pacific Youth Strategy 2005 (PYS2005) and thereby advancing the SPC's commitment to taking a more proactive role in youth development in the region.

The Pacific Youth Strategy 2005

At its meeting held in French Polynesia from 30 June to 1 July 1998, the first Conference of Youth Ministers of the Pacific Community adopted the PYS2005 as a strategic framework for addressing the increasing challenges for Pacific youth into the new millennium. In adopting the strategy, Youth Ministers, senior government officials from SPC member countries and territories, and representatives from non government organisations (NGOs) and regional and international agencies acknowledged the need for a more broad-based, integrated approach at both national and regional levels.

The PYS2005 provides such a comprehensive approach, yet is flexible enough to be responsive to emerging issues in the Pacific. It aims to create and maintain genuine opportunities for young people to play an active role in the economic, social, cultural and spiritual development of their societies. The strategy consists of six programmes, which form the platform for youth activities in the region towards the year 2005 and beyond: Pacifika Aspirations; Challenge Pacifika; Youth-Lead Pacifika; Pacifika Advocacy; Infoshare Pacifika; and Pacifika Empowerment.

Pacifika Aspirations

This programme focuses on encouraging the full participation of young people in development. Pacific Youth Ministers decided that appropriate, holistic and gender-inclusive national youth policies must be put in place and implemented by all countries in the region by the year 2005. Pacifika Aspirations promotes a multisectoral approach to youth-related issues through mainstreaming them into national development planning. It encourages the participation of young people at various levels of decision making because of the great importance of youth policy in shaping the present and future of society. This involves the establishment of supportive national frameworks and responsive programmes to cater for the increasing demands of young people, thereby contributing to the development of their full potential and the achievement of their life goals.

Challenge Pacifika

This programme calls for urgent action to implement positive and practical responses to common emerging issues in the region:

- Education – targeted on the basis that the formal education system cannot be the sole educator. Traditional family structure and life play an important role in socialising young people, thus making a significant contribution to the social goals in the development process.
- Employment – countries are urged to develop employment and training programmes (in addition to the creation of job opportunities where possible) that will enable their young people to participate more fully and meaningfully in both subsistence and cash economies and also encourage them to be involved in self-employment initiatives.

- Health – young people need to be enabled to take full responsibility for their own health by involving them in the planning, development and implementation of health education and promotional programmes aimed at addressing their major health concerns.
- Environment – introduced to provide young people with real opportunities to contribute positively to addressing environmental issues through widening initiatives and ongoing practical programmes, such as clean-up campaigns, tree planting and recycling projects, so that they learn the concept of sustainable development and increase their understanding of environmental management.
- Juvenile delinquency – aims to ensure that young people can be supported by purposeful and achievement-oriented programmes which promote the development of a healthy self-esteem and a sense of community spirit which will in turn help them to promote and uphold the values of a responsible family life, thus checking the influence of conflicting values which frequently come with development and modernisation.
- Promotion of peace – recognises the uniqueness of the cultures, values, religion and ethnicity of the Pacific region by promoting interactions that foster tolerance, understanding, acceptance, mutual concern and trust as the basis for peace.

In addition, countries are urged to address any other country-specific issues not listed above.

Youth-Lead Pacifika

This programme focuses on skills development and capacity building through appropriate training in leadership and management. It involves regular in-country courses for youth leaders in areas such as leadership; management and administration; policy development; organisational behaviour and development; team work, project planning, management and evaluation; self-motivation; personal development and efficiency programmes; managing change; problem solving; effective communication; negotiation; and interpersonal skills.

Pacifika Advocacy

This programme highlights the important role played by the private sector, churches, NGOs and youth organisations in youth development. It promotes close cooperation across all sectors in promoting the establishment of youth clubs and other interest groups where young people can share experiences and learn new skills. It also recognises the Pacific Youth Council (PYC), which is a regional, non government, voluntary association established in 1996 to encourage and strengthen territorial and national youth organisations and to promote a regional identity for Pacific youth.

Infoshare Pacifika

This programme focuses on the collection, compilation and dissemination of information on youth development at global, regional and national levels. A resource unit within the PYRB houses information and materials on youth development, publishes the 'Youthlink' newsletter, and is developing an Internet home page for the PYRB.

Pacifika Empowerment

This programme provides assistance to the 12 SPC small island states (Kiribati, Commonwealth of Northern Mariana Islands, American Samoa, Marshall Islands, Cook Islands, Palau, Wallis and Futuna, Nauru, Tuvalu, Niue, Tokelau, and Pitcairn) to support skills training opportunities and entrepreneurial initiatives for young people aged 15–24.

Achieving unity in diversity

In spite of regional diversity, some problems are universal, even though they may manifest themselves in ways that are unique to each nation or locality. Accordingly in 1998, Pacific Youth Ministers, recognising that different countries may require different approaches, commended the PYS2005 to their respective governments and administrations, and advocated a continuous political commitment to adequate allocation of resources for planning and implementing the strategy through country-specific initiatives. They also agreed that there is a need for concerted collective action, across all sectors, to more holistically address the problems affecting young people in the Pacific. An agreement was also reached by conference participants to collaborate more closely on assisting youth development in the region.

Conclusion

With limited funds available in small island nations to spend on the PYS2005 initiatives, the competition for 'donor dollars' continues to intensify as they look beyond their shores for additional resources. The PYRB continues to assist countries in securing such resources, so that the initiatives can be implemented.

In the meantime, the real test for youth development workers in the Pacific region is to ensure that our contributions to facilitating the transition of young people from adolescence to adulthood involve realistic and sound initiatives to better achieve their needs and aspirations and improve their quality of life.

The success of our efforts can only be measured by the degree of empowerment we can offer the young men and women of the Pacific, so they can make a strong connection between meeting their own needs and engaging productively in the vital task of nation building. This vision can be realised only through the willingness of young people themselves to become 'part of the solution'; through considerable political will in recognising and addressing youth issues; through the investment of adequate resources in youth programmes; and through ongoing back-up support from regional and international stakeholders in youth development.

Reference

South Pacific Commission, 1991, Summary of the Vanini consultancy report of 1989.