

Youth Empowerment - Pacific Region

Ellison Mason, 5th September 2011

The purpose of this paper is to look at the issues concerning youth empowerment. We will use the experience of youth in The South Pacific, and my own experiences as a young Solomon Islander, to open up comparisons and discussions on youth empowerment from different region of the world represented at this conference. Our purpose is to address the challenges and opportunities faced by youth today, so we can draw from each other's experiences and critically and creatively engage young people in making sustainable plans for the future.

1. What does youth empowerment mean?

Youth empowerment can mean different things to different people around the world. The meaning of empowerment relates to the culture and values of a culture whereby young people grow in ability, initiative and authority, learning to make decisions and implement what is best for them and their community. Often people think of empowerment in terms of a European or western model developed in capitalist democracies– with education, qualifications, material prosperity, technological progress, individual choice and individualistic lifestyle as the means of evaluating prosperity and success.

But the Pacific islands and other developing nation states have often shown other powerful models of empowerment. In a modern “developed” model, youth at an early age are called into a competitive education system with the view to success in a market economy, whereas in the Pacific Islands, the model of empowerment may traditionally have had much more to do with building community skills and social relationships. For example in the Pacific at an early age a young Melanesian learns to fish, to plant, build houses from locally available materials, and learns how to build and take his or her place in the community. One of the things the church and the Christian faith can help us to consider is that empowerment is not just about the empowerment of oneself and the individual but about the empowerment of the whole community in which the needs of others including the most vulnerable are very important to our understanding. A Christian understanding of empowerment involves reciprocity. We learn from the sharing of gifts, values and concerns, each one of us dependent on the other. However, in other different cultures they have their own relevant meaning of how they can explain empowerment related to their own context.

In South Africa the word that is used for this form of empowerment is *Ubuntu*: "I am what I am because of who we all are." Archbishop Desmond Tutu defines *Ubuntu* as a means of empowerment from which we can all learn:

“A person with *Ubuntu* is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper

self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed.”

Ubuntu speaks particularly about the fact that you can't exist as a human being in isolation. It speaks about our interconnectedness. You can't be human all by yourself, and when you have this quality – *Ubuntu* – you are known for your generosity. We think of ourselves far too frequently as just individuals, separated from one another, whereas you are connected and what you do affects the whole World. When you do well, it spreads out; it is for the whole of humanity.

I think many of us at this conference will recognise that same importance of community in our own cultures. In this conference then and as an Anglican Alliance we are asked to consider how we can empower one another. How the situation, opportunities, challenges, and strategies of youth in one part of the Anglican Communion can give examples and models to another part. How the situations and problems faced in one culture are also problems other cultures struggle with. In this conference we seek to ask questions, to listen to the experiences of others and to learn from one another.

Question:

What is the model of youth empowerment in your culture?

In your cultural model what is more important the empowerment of the individual or the community? Can you give examples?

How can the model of empowerment in your culture be helpful to other places?

2. Background: Impact of the increase in Youth Population

Young people comprise a very substantial proportion of Pacific Island populations. These twenty two island nations cover about one fourth of the globe (30 million square km). The total population excluding Australia and New Zealand was nine million in 2005. The last decade has seen a huge increase in the youth population. In 2005 58% of the population was under the age of 24, and this percentage is rising. One in five people were in the 15-24 year age bracket. If current demographic trends continue the number of people is expected to grow by 42% before 2050. The huge percentage of young people in modern Pacific society has had a massive impact on the society and has understandably led to problems of instability and uncertainty. These problems include:

- Inadequate access to relevant education, especially at a secondary and tertiary level.
- High levels of unemployment for young people, or underemployment.

- A high level of rural to urban migration by young people.
- Social and cultural pressures in which traditional systems of social control break down.
 - An increase in anti-social behaviour among youth who feel frustrated and alienated.
 - An increasing number of young people “at risk” through unsafe lifestyles and practices.

Statistics in many countries throughout the world show that it is this age group- 16-24 years old where unemployment is often highest. The International Labour Organisation in its World Statistics recorded that in 1999 in Solomon Islands, 46% of young women and 46% of young men were unemployed, similar figures to South Africa where in 2007 52% of young women and 43% of young men were unemployed. In South East Asia and Asia the employment rates are higher. In Indonesia for example 27% of young women and 24% of young men were recorded as unemployed in 2007. This compares with a UK rate in 2008 of 13% for young women and 17% for young men figures that even in UK are considered far too high. Unemployment leads to frustration and loss of purpose. Sustained unemployment with no resources or money can often lead to a profound sense of disempowerment and life which can easily become alienated and destructive. As St Benedict noted “Idleness can be the devil’s playground”.

Youth can often become seen as “the problem” in Pacific Island nations. In Solomon Island pidgin we use the word “master liu”. It means a person who is the master of just hanging around doing nothing. It’s the position of someone who has nowhere to go and nothing to do except live off other people. Unfortunately it is the feeling of many young people in the Pacific who feel disempowered. Such a situation is not just true of the Pacific region. In Africa 200 million people in United Nations records are said to be in the age range between 15-24 and comprise more than 20% of the population. In 2005 it was estimated that 62% of the overall population was under the age of 25. In Sub Saharan Africa 3 in 5 youths were not employed and 75% lived on less than \$2 a day. In common with the Pacific Islands this has had a huge impact on the society, on health, education, housing, social order, and causing huge numbers of young people to drift to the towns and cities in search of opportunity. This same growth of the percentage of young people is reflected in Latin America and Caribbean, South Asia and South East Asia. In South Asia there is an estimated 738 million youth between the ages of 15-24 which is 18% of the region’s population. Yet while it is easy to find data which shows the cause of the problem it is also true to say that youth is not only “the problem” but also the hope and future of emerging nations, who have more opportunities and ability to learn and communicate than ever before.

Questions:

What effect has the rise in a young population had in the area where you come from?

What are the challenges of that population increase and what are the opportunities?

3. Challenges

This paper focuses on the challenges faced by young people in the Solomon Islands and other Pacific Island States. In doing so it aims both to draw out the similarities with the challenges other nations are facing but also the differences. We seek to ask the question how has youth in your nation responded to these challenges in our modern world and what solutions or opportunities have been opened up.

3.1. Tradition and Change

It is often culture and tradition which hold societies together, creating a sense of community and belonging and also bringing order and social control. In traditional societies this process of governance is controlled by the older members of a community and young people often feel they have no voice or decision making role in the community or group. Traditional culture may often seem condemnatory or intolerant of youth culture leaving the large youth population feeling rebellious and alienated from authority and means of empowerment. Methods of communication and access to other cultures through the web, digital media, and mobile phones have meant that young people are more influenced by other worldwide cultures than ever before. In contrast the traditions of the older generation often seem narrow, intolerant and condemnatory of young people's attitudes towards sexuality, music, lifestyle, norms and values.

Question:

What are the areas of conflict between traditional culture and youth culture?

In what ways have youth been involved in leadership and governance?

3.2. Education

Nowhere is the rise in youth population felt more keenly than in the education systems. Often there is simply not enough finance and resources in an emerging nation to provide for the increased demand for education. There are many examples of the huge value that young people place on the education system, and their commitment to such systems, with a high degree of motivation and great pressure for young people to try and

achieve places in secondary schools and tertiary education. But often the education systems are simply under-resourced, and because of poverty and competition for places there is often a high drop-out rate. A large number of those who are educated leave school feeling that it has led nowhere, while at the same time education has raised expectation, and often “western” focused curriculum has not led to a job or a profession except for the privileged few. The education system can also take young people away from their cultural and rural roots. Increasingly in the Solomon Islands there has been a need to develop community schools where the local community itself initiates the need and works together to try and resource a wider education system where more can be included. Rural Training Centres are often under resourced but are one method of looking at developing an education system which educates young people with the skills they will actually need in their own cultural context. There is a great need to resource and provide relevant skills for a rural economy that will not just increase urban drift. In Melanesia the Anglican Religious Communities have provided a valuable method of education and empowerment. (The Melanesian Brotherhood, The Sisters of Melanesia, The sisters of the Church, The Society of St Francis). This is a formation process which involves living together as a community, praying together and sharing possessions and resources, learning to farm, to fish and to provide shelter and housing for that community and leaning the values of Christian Community living. It has been a very powerful alternative model throughout the pacific. These religious communities grow much of their own food, build their own houses, go out into the community to help to teach and to pray. They lead courses in Bible Study, Community living, health and nutrition, peace and reconciliation, Christian unity. By the way they aim to learn to live the Gospels not just in word but also in action. Young people through becoming members of religious communities can become highly respected members of society through their acts of service to the wider community. Perhaps these religious communities are a model for a form of education that can develop local community and the relevant life skills. Another relevant model of education is the establishment of cultural centres where traditional histories, arts, crafts, skills, music and language are fostered and valued.

Question:

What are the main frustrations faced by young people in your county in relation to education?

Are there any alternative models of education which have brought hope and empowerment?

3.3. Youth at Risk

Age 15-24 is the time in life when every individual has to make the transition from being a child to being an adult. The transition to adulthood involves physical, hormonal and psychological changes. Finding an adult place in society, receiving recognition and gaining a sense of belonging is made more difficult when there is greater social mobility and numbers of young people seeking limited opportunities in the urban environment. The transition is rarely easy and every country in the world has its share of young people who become involved in high risk behaviour. These high risk behaviours can lead to youth health issues, sexual reproductive health issues, mental health and suicide, substance abuse, crime, violence and imprisonment. Given that youth population 16-25 comprises about 20% of the population, this represents a significant economic problem and social control problem in that it undermines development and creates an environment of fear, danger, conflict and threat. A large percentage of those involved in the ethnic conflict in the Solomon Islands were that age group 16-25 years old who felt only through the use of violence and the gun did they have any authority or status or significantly anything to occupy themselves. The rise of militia gave young people a sense of purpose and power otherwise denied them.

Unfortunately it also led them deeper into destructive cycles of conflict and violence. In Papua New Guinea there is a significant problem of “rascal gangs” of a similar age and PNG cities have notoriously become places of crime and violence. The extreme divisions between the modern wealth of some in the city and the high levels of youth unemployment and deprivation have increased the sense of resentment leading to crime and violence. Similarly, in places like the Caribbean Islands, organised crimes like drug trafficking, kidnapping and money laundering are some forms of crime youths tend to practice. It is noted that the Caribbean’s murder rate is one of the highest in the world where 30 per 100,000 populations annually are victim of crime which led to death. One of the forms of “escape” from youth frustration and lack of opportunity and stimulation is through substance abuse: alcohol, drugs, solvent abuse have increased, in turn increasing cycles of criminality and violence. Sexual health with the spread of HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases has also become an increasing threat to the young. Poverty also leads to the temptations and dangers of sex trafficking and prostitution which deprived young people to turn to other risks factors.

Question:

What are the dangers to young people in your community?

How are these dangers addressed?

3.4. The Growth of Prejudice, Discrimination and Intolerance

Youth everywhere are at risk from various forms of discrimination. In the Pacific, as we have mentioned there is often a tendency for adults to marginalise young people and not to hear their voice. This can happen in village leadership, in politics and can even happen in the church. Many young people feel disillusioned with their leaders feeling that they are not represented but also they feel unable to change the structures of power democratically. As signatories of international conventions, including the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC) and The Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) many governments are committed to the elimination of discrimination. For example Section 38 of the Bill of Rights in Fiji's Constitution States:

Every person has the right to equality before the law. A person must not be unfairly discriminated against directly or indirectly on the grounds of his or her sexual orientation, birth, primary language, economic status, age or disability or discriminated against directly or indirectly on the grounds of his/her:

- a) Personal characteristics or colour circumstances including race, ethnic origin, gender,
- b) Opinion or belief except to the extent that those opinions or beliefs involved harm to others or diminution of rights. (Government of Fiji, 1997)

3.4.1. Discrimination against women

Discrimination is a very complex attitude and can easily grow especially when members of a society feel dispossessed or threatened. One most common form of discrimination is towards women in which they are deprived of education, opportunity or empowerment and treated as inferior or even violently by men simply because they are women. This is often a form of discrimination which is defended culturally. Male children are sometimes more highly valued and empowered by a culture than female children: in India for example, the government has campaigned against sex selective abortion, where parents aborted a female foetus in order to wait for a male. In many cultures it has been traditionally considered more important that men receive formal education than women for example in the Solomon Island Government Statistics of 2002 the gross enrolment ratio for males at secondary school was 33.6 compared with 24.8 for females, while males comprised 66% of the paid work force in the age group 19-25. Women have only recently had participation in government and are very underrepresented in all leadership levels. But through gender empowerment things are changing. In South Africa for example the percentage of females in secondary education is 86% compared 79% for men and in Latin

America and the Caribbean 92% of females enrolled for secondary education compared with 85% for males though only 30% of young women had paid employment compared with 58% for males of a similar age. The recognition of the ability and talents of women to take up leadership roles is challenging attitudes all over the world and nowhere is this more true than in the leadership of the church where women have traditionally been denied leadership roles.

3.4.2. Discrimination against migrants

Another form of discrimination which can lead to bitter conflict and even civil war is racial conflict based on landownership-between those who are consider themselves the indigenous land owners and those who are migrants. This can lead to racial or tribal conflict as witnessed in many parts of the world. Here in the Solomon Islands it leads to a bitter conflict between indigenous people of Guadalcanal and those seen as migrants from Malaita. In Fiji the conflict arose between those who considered themselves indigenous Fijian's and those from an Indian ethnic background, many of whom had been living in Fiji for several generations. The reason that this is a problem for youth is that youth are often drawn into the struggle. It is to be noted that many of those joining militia or militant groups are often "child soldiers" or those aged between 10-25. Often young people have been indoctrinated and influenced by others to become involved in violent action without understanding fully the moral consequences. Throughout history societies have created scapegoats in order to blame others for the problems a society is facing. Often we blame those who are different from ourselves for example: those from a different tribe, gender, race, sexuality, culture, language group, age group. In Solomon Islands discrimination can often be found in the "wontok" system. This means "one talk" or those who speak the same language" This is a system that is good in that it encourages cooperation and community but it can also become unfair and corrupt particularly when only those who speak the same language are favoured, or given money and opportunity while those of another language group are rejected.

Question:

What forms of discrimination have you witnessed in your society?

What are the ways you have seen that prejudice and discrimination can be overcome by young people?

What are some of the discriminatory problems faced by women in your society and how can it be tackled?

4. Opportunities

In July of this year in an interview in the Guardian Newspaper Archbishop of Canterbury Dr Rowan Williams expressed his hope about what can be done to begin to tackle some of these challenges by the local church. He said this:

“I came back yesterday from the Congo, what I have been looking at there is localism of a local kind. The church is doing really remarkable things with new farming techniques in a cluster of villages....In Congo I have been especially impressed by my meeting with the youngsters who have been abducted and brutalised and women who have been raped. I have realised that it is nobody but the church to hang onto these people. Especially the youngsters who have been in the militia. They talk about how the church has not given up on them. Their own communities would not receive them back because of where they had been and what they had done but the church tried to keep the door open for them.”

Youth are not simply “the problem” youth are also the solution and the future. In the countries we come from we can also see examples where the energy, the commitment, the dedication of young people when given opportunity by the church can really improve the quality of life for all people. In this section we will look at just some of those opportunities and hopefully you can provide many more examples.

4.1. Community Development Projects

The commitment and enthusiasm of youth can be harnessed to a programme of community improvement. Youth can both initiate and be involved in a whole host of programmes: making gardens, building and repairing houses, fund-raising, preparations for feast days, fishing and hunting trips, rural development projects, visiting the elderly and those with special needs.

Question:

What projects have the youth in your area have been involved in?

4.2. The Creative Arts

Young people are often able to communicate in a powerful and creative ways. This can be done through drama or music or dance. These activities draw people together and such activities like music, drama and dance can communicate much more powerfully. Young people have many creative gifts to contribute. In the South Pacific some of the favourite

activities are choir competitions, dramas based on Bible stories or wonderful singing and dancing groups. These creative arts help young people grow in confidence and find a new aspiration in life.

Question:

What are the opportunities for Creative Arts in your area?

What skills have been learnt through their use?

4.3. Peace and Reconciliation and Restorative Justice.

Often the best agents of reconciliation are the young themselves who have been involved in violent action. After the conflict in the Solomon Islands while many young people had been caught up in the violence it was also young people who needed to find ways to make reconciliation so that peace could be restored. The Melanesian Religious Communities most of their members aged between 18-28 became very instrumental in peacemaking. They took part in the decommissioning and destroying of weapons, they took part and led trauma counselling programmes, and they also encouraged others with a message of peace and with great courage broke down the barriers of prejudice. They tried not to take sides in the conflict but to model what it meant to live in a Christian Community which was not divided by race or tribe. In restorative justice two parties conflict are brought together to discuss and explain their actions. By witnessing to the truth of what took place it can be that both sides are given dignity and respect. This is often a much better of beginning the process which will settle the problem. Young people have also been actively involved in mediation and peace building and development programmes.

Question:

How have young people in your area been involved in conflict resolution or peace and reconciliation work?

How can young people become peacemakers?

4.4. Sport and Recreation

Sport has an ability to unite (and sometimes divide) many people. Sporting events are one area where young people's active involvement can build their self-esteem behaviour and through it they can gain good leadership skills. Sport is one way that can break down barrier of differences where people can interact and share their sporting skills. For example the London Olympic which will be held in 2012 is very much an opportunity

that can inspire, educate and help young people around the world to feel empowered and live a healthy life style. The Olympic ideal also stresses the importance of building bonds of unity and understanding.

Question:

What sports motivate young people where you come from?

What are the benefits of sport for young people and in what way can it be encouraged?

4.5. Youth involvement in Health Projects

Youth may often be those most at risk from sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS but they are also those who are often in the best position to bring education, information and awareness. Surveys in developing countries reveal that less than half of young people can correctly identify ways to avoid getting HIV/AIDS and reject common myths about the virus. Young women in the Pacific generally have less knowledge than young men in this matter. A report conducted in 2004 in fifteen countries in the South Pacific estimated that about 11, 211 cases of HIV/AIDS were reported. In this report almost 16% were found in 15-24 years old which means in every country with 13 or more cases, at least one case was a youth. In Papua New Guinea it is the Anglican Church which has led the way in HIV/AIDS Awareness Programmes and have had the courage and authority to tackle an area which it has previously been considered taboo to talk about in public. Sexual health awareness Programmes led by young people for young people (known as peer educators) have often also been successful in encouraging young people to talk more honestly and openly about the issues that concern them. These are examples of these peer training programmes all over the world. This kind of programme for example in Malawi has helped to bring the infection rate right down over the last five years. Contextually appropriate dramas performed by young people can be another good method of tackling issues on a community level so that people can engage. Young people have also been involved in Malaria Education Programmes and other practical health education.

Question:

In what way have youth become actively involved in health programmes and HIV/AIDS awareness programmes?

What is the value of peer educators? (Peer educators are programmes where the educators are of the same age and background as those that are being educated)

4.6. Development of the internet and telecommunications

Access to the internet, the use of mobile phones, *Facebook* and *Skype* have all brought massive changes to youth all over the world. Electronic media really belongs to this generation and often has opened up the opportunity to communicate and access information in a way that has never been done before. This obviously brings dangers but also massive opportunities for young people. For the first time young people have the ability not only to contact friends and relatives in other towns but to link up with young people right across the world creating networks where people can share information and ideas. The importance of these social media sites was clearly seen throughout the Middle East earlier in the year in what became known as the “Arab Spring.” So many demands greater leadership that is democratically open and free from censorship and justice have been by young people. In remote parts of the world through mobile phones and rural internet stations (often operated by solar panels) young people have been able to access information and ideas in a way which has revolutionised methods of learning and communication, and enabled them to challenge accepted thinking. It means that information previously kept in libraries and universities is now freely available to all.

Question:

In what way has the internet and mobile phone changed things where you live?

What are the opportunities that this form of communication opens up?

How can the internet draw people into new networks and communities?

What are the dangers?

5. Conclusion

Our youth are our future. The local church offers a uniquely empowering way for young people to become engaged both with the challenges and opportunities of our time. More than ever before we have the ability to both communicate with, and learn from, the experiences of others across the world. Often we think that the struggles and problems we are facing belong to us alone and we start to blame others for the problem. This paper has tried to show how many of the difficulties and challenges we face are faced by young people across the world. It has also hoped to show that there are brilliant initiatives, projects and examples of how young people have been able to transform challenges into opportunities and hope for the future. One of the greatest opportunities of all is the opportunity of our Christian faith to grow. Jesus said that the “Kingdom of heaven is as small as a mustard seed

but can grow into the greatest of all trees in which birds can come and make their nests and find shelter.” This is a good parable for youth empowerment. Our voice and examples may sometimes seem small and insignificant but all over the world there are examples of young people who through their Christian faith have managed to find opportunities for real transformation and growth not just for themselves but also for the community and nation in which they live.

Question:

What does the parable of the mustard seed tell you about youth empowerment? (Matthew Chapter 13:31-33)

List some of the opportunities that you have for young people to bring transformation and growth.

How can you take this programme of youth empowerment forward?

How can the church help?