

Engaging Young People in the Solomon Islands for Red Cross Action on Climate Change - A case study by Julie Webb

A young population

The Solomon Islands is a society where power and decision-making is traditionally based on age, so young people have long faced challenges in trying to voice concerns. This is an even bigger issue in the Solomon Islands because the country has a very young population – with people under 29 making up nearly 70 per cent of the population.¹



Sport plays a big part of life for youth in the Solomon Islands

¹ Department of Finance and Treasury, Solomon Islands Statistics Office, Household Income and Expenditure Survey 2005/6: National Report Honiara, September 2006.

An International Labour Organization (ILO) study in 2001 found that about 7,500 young people enter the workforce each year, but the maximum annual increase in employment since 1982 has only been 3,800 jobs.² Youth unemployment or underemployment is chronic.

There has also been a drift to the capital Honiara, on Guadalcanal, since independence in 1978, and there are more and more improvised settlements in and around the town, with very limited infrastructure.

Barriers to getting involved

As a young person growing up in Honiara, Red Cross worker George Baragamu says the hardest thing was making “connections” with other people. George started as a volunteer with Solomon Islands Red Cross (SIRC) in 2006 because he wanted to take the initiative to find opportunities. At the Red Cross he gained professional experience and a job as the climate change and disaster risk reduction officer; while the Red Cross got a passionate and intelligent young employee who inspires others through the climate-change programme.

It has also been a chance for the National Society to learn how to engage young people. George has created an active group of young volunteers to take part in activities, and through this he has expanded linkages for them.

² International Labour Organization 2001 *Employment Opportunities for Youth in the Solomon Islands* Suva: International Labour Organisation.

George says young people face difficulty in making connections and joining networks and youth groups, which can be insular and focused on a specific area or church. In addition, many youth groups do not have a strong *female* presence.

He says that young people in the Solomon Islands face challenges because most government policy and legislation does not reflect youth issues and so they are left vulnerable.

Things are changing, but only slowly. In 2007 the government established a Ministry of Women, Youth and Children's Affairs to

*uphold and promote the rights of...young people...through effective partnership and strong commitment, thereby creating equal opportunities for all to advance the wellbeing of this nation.*³

Along with the establishment of the ministry, other positive steps have been taken, such as the youth division at Honiara city council that links up existing youth groups.

Another barrier for young people is the education system. A growing number of children are unable to enrol in primary school because the number of schools and teachers is not keeping pace with an explosion in population. Many young people are pushed out of the education system, especially after sixth grade, as

³ Policy Goal 24 of the Coalition for National Unity and Rural Advancement Government Policy Statements (CNURA), January 2008. CNURA Translation and Implementation Framework, February 2008.

the number of school places falls.⁴ There can also be family pressure to seek paid employment early but employment opportunities are few.⁵

The lack of employment and education and the difficulty in making connections mean that many youth "*stap nomoa*" – they stay at home and don't do a lot. Young people are often financially dependent on their family – particularly hard in Honiara where, as George says, "money is key to everything".

A 2003 study reported the issues identified by young men and women and their communities:⁶

- Learning opportunities
- Participation
- Livelihoods
- Youth activities
- Reproductive health.

The Red Cross

The SIRC has 21 paid employees at headquarters and four provincial branches. As well as climate change and disaster risk reduction it focuses on health awareness, disaster management, dissemination of International Humanitarian Law, blood-donor recruitment, welfare and first-aid training. It is active in some of the most remote areas of the country.

⁴ United Nations Development Programme *MDGs In The Pacific The Challenge of Securing MDG Gains in Solomon Islands*, 13 Feb 2007.

⁵ Hassall and Associates International 2003, *Youth in Solomon Islands: A Participatory Study of Issues, Needs and Priorities, Final Report*.

⁶ Hassall and Associates International 2003, *Youth in Solomon Islands: A Participatory Study of Issues, Needs and Priorities, Final Report*.



One of the winning entries in the climate change poster competition

The Red Cross has taken the growing population of young, urban people with time on their hands as an opportunity, engaging them in its programmes and activities as a way to address some of these issues and improve the lives of Solomon Islanders. Secretary General Nancy Jolo says that engaging young people like George to lead programmes is one way to promote youth development and an opportunity for them to take leading roles involving responsibility and challenge. It is a chance for young people to gain work experience.

George is a good example of a volunteer who has gone on to formal employment with the Red Cross. The chance to develop skills is invaluable for young people and involvement in the Red Cross is also a great way for them to build networks.

The devastating earthquake and tsunami that hit the Western and Choiseul provinces in April 2007 tested the skills and capacity of the Red Cross. The death toll was more than 50, with an estimated 9,000 people displaced. Damage to housing and other infrastructure was significant. The SIRC and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) are in the final stage of rehabilitation work in the Western province. In the relief operation the majority of volunteers were young people, with energy, strength and time to spare.

Climate-change impacts

George says he's committed to working in climate change because it is a cross-cutting issue – it will affect all other sectors of society in a country already vulnerable to climate impacts. Climate change is already having an impact and villagers have experienced:

- Rising sea-levels;
- Salt-water intrusion into fields and crops;
- Contamination of freshwater Aquifers;
- Coastal erosion.

There are also reports of drought in some areas, as in the Reef Islands, in Temotu province. In other parts of the country tides are now higher because of the sea-level rise. The frequency and the intensity of cyclones are increasing, resulting in more deaths and economic losses.

This means greater demands for disaster response by the Red Cross.⁷

The impacts mean that all the 900 islands – whether they are atolls, or artificial or mountainous islands – will feel the impacts of climate change.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change identifies small-island states like the Solomon Islands as particularly at risk from climate change impacts.⁸ The economies and small communities of the Solomon Islands are highly dependent on agriculture and fishing, both of which are very vulnerable to the impacts of climate change.

The contribution of the Pacific region to global emissions is minute in comparison to the severity of the impacts starting to be felt there. As George puts it, “somewhere else in the world people have done things and keep doing things that have created the climate-change problem. It wasn’t even my generation; it was the older generations that did most of the damage”. George distinguishes climate change from other important issues facing young people such as HIV. With that, he says, “if you can raise the awareness of a young person to change their behaviour they will...and they won’t get HIV”. But with climate change it doesn’t matter what is done here to reduce emissions – the impacts will still be felt.

⁷ Solomon Islands Red Cross 2008, *Preparedness for Climate Change Background Document: Consequences of Climate Change for Humanitarian Work Through the Eyes of Solomon Islands Red Cross*.

⁸ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, *Climate Change 2007: Synthesis Report Summary for Policymakers*.

The climate-change programme

With climate-change impacts already being felt in Solomon Islands it is important for the SIRC to prepare and engage young people, as they have their lives ahead of them – in which to both feel impacts *and* make a difference.⁹ As George points out, they aren’t as “stuck in their ways”.

Climate change is resulting in increased climate variability, and for an already disaster-prone country this is of great concern. Disaster-risk management is essential to the SIRC strategic plan for 2005–9 and focuses on two key areas:

- Disaster and emergency response
- Community-based disaster preparedness and risk reduction

In the Federation’s 2010 strategy one of the four core areas is the response to weather and climate-related disasters. The SIRC embarked on the climate change programme in February 2007 in recognition of “the importance of the impacts of climate change on human life and well-being,” according to Jolo.

The programme has been effective in showing what an asset the enthusiasm and energy of young people are, with the forming of the young team who undertake some of its programme activities and double as a youth group. George points out that because young people are active in workplaces, families, sport, churches and schools, engaging them is a great way to

⁹ Solomon Islands Red Cross 2008, *Preparedness for Climate Change Background Document: Consequences of Climate Change for Humanitarian Work Through the Eyes of Solomon Islands Red Cross*.

expand the reach of the programme.

SIRC climate-change programme activities involving youth now include:

Schools awareness

Young people are trained in the concepts of climate change, who then become peer educators in schools and communities.



Students at a climate change awareness session

There is a new generation to train each year. Sixteen and 17-year-olds are targeted. The SIRC are working with schools to include climate-change awareness, including disaster risk reduction, in assessments.



Poster competition

Honiara students were invited to submit poster representations of the impacts of climate change in the Pacific for World Environment Day 2007. The winning entries are printed and distributed to communities and schools. Judges considered their accuracy, originality and creativity, and a representative of the Solomon Islands Artists Association then supported the winning young artists.

Village assessment

An assessment was undertaken in the isolated and vulnerable North Malaita artificial islands using a combined approach based on the Red Cross Vulnerability and Capacity Assessment and WWF's Climate Witness Toolkit. In the consultations, one of the Red Cross facilitators was a youth, and actively engaged young people in the community so that their voices could also be heard. The main issue facing the community is access to water. At present they rely either on catching rain in tanks or they have to canoe to the mainland – both weather-dependent activities.

With changing rainfall and wind patterns, they are becoming more vulnerable to water shortages. Installing more water-storage capacity was identified as the priority number one.

Radio quizzes

The SIRC worked with the national disaster-management office to design an FM radio quiz for schools for World Disaster Reduction Day on how to reduce disaster risk and impact. It went out in the afternoon, when students are home, in the capital Honiara and well

beyond. Messages about climate change were integrated into the programme.

Advocacy and youth networks

The SIRC is represented in the development of the national adaptation plan of action (NAPA) and is both a Red Cross advocate and a youth advocate. The Red Cross has presented at the consultations of the NAPA on the humanitarian impacts of climate change across different sectors. The National Society ran awareness programmes for the groups involved in International Youth Day 2008, which was themed on climate change.

Clean Up The World Day, 2007

Solomon Islands Youth for Change and the SIRC got together to coordinate the Clean Up The World Day campaign in 2007. They worked with young people to clean up garbage and weeds around town and along main roads.

National Youth and Climate Change Forum

SIRC has been instrumental in involving multiple stakeholders and donors involved in a National Youth Forum on climate change to be held in October 2008. Risk reduction as a strategy for dealing with climate change will be a key theme in the agenda and youth action plans will be a key outcome of the forum.

The future

George Baragamu says engaging young people in climate-change activities and raising awareness makes

them feel they can make a difference to a global issue. The climate-change programme has been able to make use of the energy and enthusiasm of young people and expand its own reach.

In the future, the SIRC plans to:

- Raise schools awareness
- Include remote parts of the country
- Advocate for the involvement of youth in national policy and planning
- Act as a bridge between youth at community and national level
- Work with schools to integrate climate change and disaster risk reduction into the curriculum



tingting lo climate change – tingting lo action – tingting lo youth!

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think climate change – think action – think youth!

For further information please contact Rebecca McNaught, mcnaught@climatecentre.org.