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Fault lines for unrest in the Pacific: Youth, livelihoods and land rights in driving and mitigating conflict

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Abstract: *Instances of civil unrest and disorder have pockmarked the mainly peaceful functioning of multiple Pacific states in recent decades. This paper examines factors which can be seen as fault lines for predicting and mitigating such unrest, with a particular focus on Fiji and Solomon Islands. Drawing on data collected through interviews with youth advocates and activists, it becomes clear that the common justification of 'ethnic tensions' for past unrest and fears of future unrest being necessitated by a 'youth bulge' oversimplifies the complexity of factors that lead to disorder. Issues of land rights, uncertain livelihood futures and public perceptions of inequality provide more salient framings for understanding why citizens engage in unrest. Indeed, it is perceptions of injustice and inequality which may well prove to be the greater indicator of the likelihood of any future destabilisation.*

Keywords: *civil unrest, conflict, land rights, livelihoods, Pacific, youth*

Instances of civil unrest and disorder represent fissures in the otherwise peaceful and orderly everyday functioning of Pacific communities. Despite, or perhaps because of, this is important to heed the lessons of past anti-social incidents so as not to replicate the conditions which precipitated them and may increase the prospect for future such incidents. There are numerous precedents globally of disenfranchised young people participating in and leading demonstrations resulting in rapid shifts of the social order from beyond the French Revolution (Gillis, 1981) to as recently as the Arab Spring (Lesch, 2011) and Hong Kong pro-democracy movement (Lam-Knott, 2019). There is no reason to believe Oceania is immune to such possibilities. Indeed, recent instances of conflict in various Pacific states have included significant involvement of young people.

In this paper I explore the role of youth in recent conflicts in the region, focusing on the social, political and economic issues that have precipitated such conflict, and offering a view of fault lines which may indicate the prospects of future outbreaks of unrest and disorder. I do this by reflecting on the political economy of youth in Fiji and Solomon Islands, particularly the social roles that they are culturally expected and allowed to play. To do this I draw on data from interviews with youth activists and advocates and observations conducted in each country in 2015. This paper makes specific reference to the civil conflict in Solomon Islands at the turn of the century, and the impact of political coups d'état in Fiji between 1987 and 2006. To attempt to understand the role of youth as agents and victims of conflict, I then look into the wider socio-political context of factors leading to unrest. This examination includes looking at lessons that may be applicable for other Pacific states with large youth populations. Rather than repeat claims that Melanesia represents an 'arc of instability' (Dobell, 2007) or that a 'youth bulge' compels conflict (Goldstone, 2002; Leahy *et al*., 2007), appreciating the structural fault lines which may provoke conflict highlights that unrest is by no means the usual state of affairs in Pacific states. Further, examining these fault lines demonstrates that youth involvement in civil unrest is symptomatic of broader social fractures, rather than being sufficiently explained by the presence of a large youth population.

Arguing against claims that ethnic tensions have been the root cause of conflicts in Fiji and Solomon Islands, this article looks at alternative explanations. Strongest among these are arguments related to land rights and associated

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issues of identity and political power, though I argue these fault lines are most prevalent as expressions of social disaffection as a reflection of poor livelihood opportunities. I offer that young people are no more or less likely to be engaged in civil conflict than others if they have appropriate opportunities for sustainable and fulfilling livelihoods, but that the risks of youth-led conflict increase when both immediate and long-term livelihood opportunities look bleak.

Framing and methodology

The data presented in this paper were collected during doctoral fieldwork in 2015, when I spent time in each of Fiji and Solomon Islands discussing issues of youth livelihoods, leadership and civic engagement with youth activists and advocates. Research participants embodied a cross section of Fijian and Solomon Islander societies, incorporating figures such as bureaucrats, development practitioners, members of local and national youth councils, religious leaders and interest-based activists (e.g. disability, environment, women's rights and so on). Participants reflected diverse gender, sexual orientation, physical ability and ethnic demographics. Research participants were not selected for their involvement in civil conflict, although their experiences speak to the pervasive impacts of unrest that marked the formative years of Fijians and Solomon Islanders born between 1980 and 2000.

This paper particularly draws upon data from interviews with these individuals, complemented by focus groups held with youth in urban, peri-urban and rural locations in each country, and ethnographic observations made during fieldwork, complemented by experience working and socialising with youth activists and advocates in the years prior to and following fieldwork. Interviews were semi-structured, focusing on the structures that assisted or stymied young peoples' civic engagement while allowing participants the opportunity to guide conversation.

This paper draws on applied political economic analysis (PEA) to examine the structural factors that influence life choices and opportunities of Fijian and Solomon Islander youth. Applied PEA is concerned with how power is exercised in practice at an everyday level, as opposed to identifying where formal power lies (Leftwich, 2006; Rocha Menocal *et al*., 2018). Utilising applied PEA has been guided by the forthcoming accounts of interviewees speaking of the challenges that Fijian and Solomon Islander youth face and their limited political capital to tackle these challenges.

It should be noted that terminology of youth and young people is used interchangeably in this paper. In Oceania, these terms are socially defined and enacted; they do not adhere to fixed parameters such as age, although policy documents label youth as being 'between 15 and 34 years of age' in Solomon Islands (Government of Solomon Islands, 2017: 14) and 'between the ages of 15 and 35' in Fiji (Government of Fiji, 2012: 3). As Lee and Craney (2019: 2) articulate, youthhood is most accurately determined by cultural values that 'often mean that youth are understood to be those who are not yet married with children or in positions of authority. Simply being of a certain age or occupying "adult" roles, such as being in paid employment, is not always enough to be considered fully adult'.

The role of youth in Pacific conflicts

In the last two decades alone there have been multiple instances of youth involvement in civil unrest – such as riots and violent protest – across Oceania. In this time conflicts of varying scale have taken place in Fiji, Kanaky/New Caledonia, Papua New Guinea (PNG), Solomon Islands, Tonga and Vanuatu. Tongan commoners caused widespread damage to the capital, Nuku'alofa, in riots in 2006 prompted by the stalling progress of democracy and perceptions of dishonest governance processes that favoured the nobility (Campbell, 2008; van Fossen, 2018). In the early years of the twenty-first century conflicts engulfed sections of Kanaky/New Caledonia, PNG, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, attributed to a combination of poor livelihoods opportunities, urban migration squeezes and ethnic tensions (Wainwright, 2003; Storey, 2005). Unrest flared again in PNG in 2016 as student demonstrators called for the resignation of the then-Prime Minister, Peter O'Neill, following allegations of corruption (Connors and Barker 2016). Fiji has experienced recurrent issues related to political legitimacy since 1987, with roots in similar issues of livelihoods opportunities

and hostility between ethnicities (Firth, 2012; Naidu, 2013).

All of these incidents have been strongly influenced by youth populations. With these widespread displays of disaffection emanating from similar concerns, it would appear that while these demonstrations and conflicts are notable for rupturing sustained peace, they are not inexplicable oddities. Rather, a number of social and economic structural factors suggest where particular fault lines for youth disenfranchisement and unrest may stem from.

Disengaged and disaffected youth have been found more likely to participate in acts of civil disobedience and conflict globally (Urdal, 2006; UNDP, 2013). Urdal (2006) argues that such unrest is the result of structural factors impinging on young peoples' abilities to engage in sustainable livelihoods and express themselves as active citizens. Such factors may include young people experiencing economic pressures combined with a lack of employment opportunities, a higher tolerance to risk due to having fewer dependents and material goods, and exclusion from decision-making processes demonstrating limited political capital (Urdal, 2004: 5). Highlighting the connection between political capital and sustainable development, the 2013 Human Development Report notes: 'Unless people can participate meaningfully in the events and processes that shape their lives, national human development paths will be neither desirable nor sustainable' (UNDP, 2013: 6). The report further outlines the risk of communities failing to engage youth thus:

> Among the most active protestors are young people. In part this is a response to job shortages and limited employment opportunities for educated young people. History is replete with popular rebellions against unresponsive governments. Such upheaval can derail human development – as unrest impedes investment and growth and autocratic governments divert resources to maintaining law and order. (UNDP, 2013: 6)

In Solomon Islands the Tension (see Liloqula, 2000; Bennett, 2002; Vella, 2014) and the 2006 riots that included the burning down of Chinatown in Honiara as a response to citizen perceptions of government corruption (Dobell, 2007) demonstrate localised examples of this risk in Oceania. Further, they highlight the paradoxical nature of such conflict with young people found to be disproportionately represented both as agents in such unrest, and also victims (UNFPA, 2005; Noble *et al*., 2011; Ride, 2019). Their status as victims occurs both at the time of unrest and further through the disintegration of social capital and livelihoods opportunities that result from conflict. Opportunities dissipate in their own communities as youth are seen as 'threats to the social order' (Curtain and Vakaoti, 2011: 8).

Nacanieli Seru, who works with former combatants of the Tension, explained to me that the conflict escalated quickly in response to social, economic and political ruptures that the indigenous Guale people of Guadalcanal – the island where Solomon Islands' capital, Honiara, is located – were feeling. Nacanieli views the conflict as being an unintentional rupturing of peace and security that grew from the grievances Guale people felt towards the government and large number of migrants from the neighbouring island of Malaita. He told me:

> There was no intention for Malaitans to chase or kill the Guadalcanal and there was no intention [for] Guadalcanal to chase and kill the Malaitans… It's just because the Bona Fide Demands[1] were not met by the government… Guadalcanal people made this small demonstration, but it went out of control.

Through his work with former combatants, Nacanieli has noticed a growing divide between youth and adults in their longer-term responses to the Tension. Those who lived through the unrest as adults respond seek to avoid future civil conflict and anti-social behaviours. Meanwhile today's youth, who lived through the violence as children, are responding to the social and economic fissures that were exacerbated by the Tension by engaging in further anti-social activities. He explains:

> With the former combatants that were involved in the Tension, I don't think that they will hold a gun again. But with young people, this is something the government needs to address and consider to try to heal the trauma of the Tension… I understand that now there is a rise in criminal activity, especially around Guadalcanal. The age-group involved is 24 downwards. Maybe

> they were ten during the Tension [or] about eight years old.

Although multiple accounts of the Tension have been offered (e.g. Wainwright, 2003; Hameiri, 2007; Allen, 2013), the role of youth during and post-conflict has been little addressed despite recognition of their roles as perpetrators and victims (Evans, 2016; Ride, 2019). The Solomon Islands Truth and Reconciliation Commission, tasked with forensically investigating the causes and consequences of the Tension, found that the armed engagement of youth in the warring parties was 'important, though irregular' (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2012: 232). As a vulnerable population at the time of the Tension and the generation whose formative years were most shaped by the conflict, these youth have experienced acute personal pain and been subjected to the effects of social capital erosion. As discussed below, the causes of the conflict were largely structural, with Wainwright listing them as 'Weak institutions, corrupt governments, criminalisation of politics, poor law and order, insufficient revenue, economic stagnation, social dislocation, disaffected and alienated youth, a growing culture of violence, international neglect, collapse of government services, disillusioned and passive populations, and a plentiful supply of guns' (Wainwright, 2003: 27). Troublingly, many of the same issues are still present, particularly for the youth of Honiara.

Though Fiji's instances of conflict are best represented in the coups d'état of 1987 and 2006 and attempted coup of 2000, which were driven by military and business interests, the roles of young people in relation to these events should not be overlooked. Specific to the 2000 attempted coup by failed businessman George Speight, disaffected young Fijians were seen as contributing to a sense of social disorder which precipitated the attempt (Naidu, 2006: 300), as well as responding to it through acts of violence and theft in the immediate aftermath (Lal, 2008: 2).

With high levels of aid dependency (Dornan and Pryke, 2017) and varying levels of political stability (Reilly, 2004; Wood, 2018) in Oceania, localised instances of civil unrest can have broader impacts. The regional security response to the Tension offers the most salient example of how countries throughout and bordering Oceania viewed the containment of violence as being in their own interests. Following a request from the Solomon Islands government, the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) involved 15 countries engaging in a coordinated peacekeeping mission in the country (Kaua and Sore, n.d.; Dinnen, 2012). Thirteen of these were Pacific island states, with Australia leading the mission and Aotearoa/New Zealand offering extensive assistance.

Parallel to the experience of young Solomon Islanders growing up during the Tension, the impacts on Fijian youth of living through multiple fractures of their democracy are difficult to determine. Known as 'coup babies' (Vakaoti, 2013), these youth have had their engagement with the state marked by periodic political chaos. The impacts of living through up to four coup attempts, depending on age, and under a military regime between 2006 and 2014 – when democratic elections recommenced – are unknown. There is every possibility that the return to democracy that occurred in 2014 will result in deeper civic engagement from Fijian youth who have a greater appreciation of their abilities to participate in the political process. Conversely, the lack of democracy in their formal years coupled with social norms which minimise youth engagement in formal and informal civil discourse and decision-making processes in Oceania (Vakaoti, 2013; Scott-Parker and Kumar, 2018; Craney, 2019) may have entrenched a sense of apathy to governance issues within the majority of the youth population.

Structural issues leading to youth disenfranchisement

The structural fault lines creating and perpetuating youth disenfranchisement are well known globally. Factors such as underemployment, ineffective education systems, inequality across urban, peri-urban and rural divides and structural minimisation (Ware, 2004; Urdal, 2006; Alwazir, 2016; Yarwood, 2016; Sukarieh and Tannock, 2018; Craney, 2019) combine to limit the capacities of, and opportunities for, young people and their self-actualisation. If these issues are not addressed the future for Pacific youth

and the greater well-being of communities throughout the region appear to be bleak. Curtain and Vakaoti caution:

> Continuing high population growth; rapid urban expansion; political volatility; under-performing economies, now further weakened by the impact of global economic crises; and the rising cost of food point to a future for many young Pacific Islanders that holds an increased risk of entrenchment of poverty and broadening disparities, which will cause widespread discontent. (Curtain and Vakaoti, 2011: 5)

The social risks of young people not having opportunities to develop their full potential extend beyond the potential for conflict. As youth struggle to take advantage of livelihood opportunities they are less likely to engage with their communities through pro-social behaviours. Researchers have argued that this is due to delays to their development and initiation into socially ascribed adult roles, where their participation and worth would be more highly valued (Woo and Corea, 2009; Vakaoti, 2012). Importantly, examining the barriers Pacific youth face in regards to livelihood and civic engagement opportunities provides scope for incorporating the experiences of young women, who are often overlooked in studies focusing on a connection between youth bulges and violence (Pruitt, 2020). Woo and Corea (2009: 5) identify the structural barriers to Pacific youth actualisation and their impacts, thus: 'Unemployment and underemployment and lack of livelihood opportunities; insufficient, unequal and inappropriate education and skills; poor governance and weak political participation; gender inequalities and socialization; legacy of past violence'. They further offer: 'Many Pacific countries show one or more of these factors' (Woo and Corea, 2009: 5).

Though these issues have long been recognised, little has been done to effectively address them (Maebiru, 2013; Evans, 2019). This highlights an immediate issue of these young people's lack of political capital, where they are excluded from decision-making processes and opportunities to develop their individual and collective capabilities are not supported. Such exclusion forecasts future difficulties regarding human and social capital when the time comes for these young people to become leaders of their communities as fewer individuals will have been exposed to social and cultural forms of development into these roles. Further demonstrating their political minimisation, the needs of youth are glossed over in a practical sense in policy and programme initiatives from Pacific governments (Noble *et al*., 2011; Maebiru, 2013). Solomon Islands youth and gender development worker, Rose Maebiru, notes:

> Countries in the Pacific have embarked on several strategies to address the development of their young people… These 'paper commitments' often lack political will, resources and capacity to realise the policy goals and targets, fuelling discontent, alienation and a sense of hopelessness among young people. (Maebiru, 2013: 148)

When youth experience repeated failures in policy development and institutional support it makes little sense for them to hold hope that future commitments carry any promise for them. Maebiru warns about the consequences of such inaction, arguing that 'The frustrations of young people are evident in unfortunate events such as political and social upheavals that have occurred in some countries where young people were engaged in armed conflict, violence and other anti-social actions' (Maebiru, 2013: 148). Tura Lewai, a civil society activist from Fiji, spoke to me of the sense of disconnectedness that results from such real and perceived minimisation. 'Politics, as a whole, has really affected how young people perceive their future in this country. I speak not only from my own perspective, but from the young people that I've spoken to in the communities. Most of them have a sense of hopelessness about what's going to happen', he said. Similarly, Sandra Bartlett, a youth-focused development worker in Solomon Islands, shared how she has seen a sense of hopelessness in youth result in anti-social and self-destructive behaviours. She told me:

> The biggest issue is that there are no opportunities. That is basically it. They get depressed, so what do you do?… You find kwaso,[2] which is cheap, it's $10 [SBD; approximately USD1.20] for that little [600 mL] Schweppes bottle and that mixes you how many 1.5 litre bottles that you can get drunk off?! Marijuana is only about two dollars a joint. It's cheaper than eating. So, a lot of them, that's their life – just revelry. It stems from depression and that there is nothing they can do.

Evidence from Fiji and Solomon Islands shows that even when structures exclude active youth civic participation a cohort of engaged young citizens will remain civically engaged (Vakaoti, 2013; Craney, 2019). As has been demonstrated through the acts of unrest across Oceania in recent decades, Pacific youth as a broader collective are not so fixed in their social positions that they will respond to opportunity deficits with perpetual passivity. Further, recent research suggests that social media is providing an emerging space of critical civic engagement by Pacific youth, partially due to the fewer social barriers to their participation (Brimacombe *et al*., 2018; Craney, 2019).

Youth engagement in acts of conflict and civil unrest carry common threads related to institutional deficits and lack of opportunity. As UNICEF Pacific notes, 'Poverty, education systems focused on white-collar employment skills, stagnating economies that do not provide enough employment opportunities, and rural/urban inequalities are still the most significant underlying causes of youth problems' (Curtain and Vakaoti, 2011: 5). Not only does it appear that these issues are not being resolved looking forward, but their potential impacts can be viewed in the recent history of Solomon Islands.

The Tension bore all the hallmarks of youth civic disengagement influencing the realisation of civil conflict. As youth from across the nation found their way to Honiara seeking employment to secure the livelihoods of themselves and their families in their home villages and islands through remittances (Jourdan, 1995; Connell, 2011), they instead found barriers to formal employment. This resulted in increased youth unemployment, poverty, reliance on local kinship networks and the growth of complex resilience systems within the young people affected (Anderson, 2008: 4; Woo and Corea, 2009: 5). Impacts were also felt across the wider community as rural–urban migration increases population density in urban areas, which increases competition for lucrative employment opportunities (Abbott and Pollard, 2004: 30) but also decreases population density in rural areas. This has social, cultural and economic impacts on rural origin communities, an area of study that remains under-researched.

Potential exists here for a vicious cycle to be created whereby greater population density without concomitant increased livelihood opportunities leads to antisocial behaviours which limit economic growth, further reducing employment opportunities. Conflict and instability negatively impact on economic indicators, social cohesion and legitimacy of formal institutions which, in turn, increase the prospects for instability. As Bryant-Tokalau (2014) notes: 'Conflict is likely in the future to originate in the towns of the Pacific that now not only contain more than half the population, often with people living in difficult circumstances with no security, but also are places where inequalities are becoming more obvious' (p. 55).

Ethnic tensions, land rights and inequality

Although beyond the scope of this paper to analyse in detail, it is impossible to discuss the instances of civil unrest in Fiji and Solomon Islands without mentioning ethnic tensions in the two countries. Vakaoti claims, 'The issue of ethnicity cannot be played down in any discussion pertaining to Fiji' (Vakaoti, 2012: 3). This statement seems to neatly encapsulate the sentiment behind the vast majority of literature related to civil society and civil unrest in Fiji (e.g. Prasad, 1998; Firth, 2012; Naidu, 2013; Baledrokadroka, 2015). Replace 'Fiji' for 'Solomon Islands' and it would appear equally representative of the literature pertaining to the Tension (e.g. Wainwright, 2003; Anderson, 2008; Noble *et al*., 2011; Dinnen, 2012). But while the theme of ethnic tension is recurrent through most of the relevant literature, closer inspection reveals it to be only one factor driving discord, potentially more important as an indicator of broader troubles than as a standalone fault line for unrest.

The episodes of unrest and conflict in Fiji and Solomon Islands in recent decades bear both striking similarities as well as differences. In Fiji, tension is understood to exist between the indigenous iTaukei and the Indo-Fijian population which descends from forced Indian labour migration under the British colonists in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. In Solomon Islands, the primary conflict is understood to be between two communities indigenous to the country, the Guale of Guadalcanal and Malaitans who have migrated to Guadalcanal from neighbouring island, Malaita. While ethnic

hostilities are rightly identified as a significant contributing factor to the political coups in Fiji and the Tension at the turn of the century in Solomon Islands, there are deeper issues causing and contributing to unrest that are both cultural and structural.

Land rights provide a solid starting point for understanding civil unrest in each country. The 1987 coups in Fiji are widely understood to have been motivated by unease from the iTaukei community that the Indo-Fijian community were beginning to outnumber them in terms of population size, political representation and material wealth, with a fear that this would extend to co-option of the lands on which iTaukei had lived, worked and worshipped for centuries (Naidu, 2013). The fears of losing control of land and decision-making were entangled for iTaukei with fears of losing history and culture. As Carling summarises, 'while those of an entrepreneurial inclination view land as an economic utility, it is for the indigenous Fijians, part of their very beginning, their soul; inherited from forebears and destined for their progeny and generations to come till time immemorial' (Carling, 2009: 60). To witness this is as simple as to enter into a conversation with an iTaukei and be summarily asked, '*O iko mai vei?* [Where are you from?]'. In a western context this question could be answered with a reference to where one lives or works or identifies as their home location. For iTaukei, however, it is a marker of the village that their *mataqali* [clan] belong to and indicates a social understanding of who they are as a person and the history they carry. For this reason, many iTaukei in Suva – including a growing number of youths who descend from those who migrated from rural and island locations – respond that they belong to a village which they have never set foot in, for that village is still understood to be where their spiritual connection to land lies. Naidu (2003) explains that 'While the physical geography of the indigenous village is limited, there are no limits to the social geography of the village' (p. 26).

This understanding of the connection to land for iTaukei does not explain ethnic conflict in its entirety, but instead offers a launching pad for understanding the cultural and structural fears felt by indigenous Fijians. The multiple stressors caused by economic modernisation, rural–urban migration, and exposure to examples of economic inequality have been felt by wide swathes of the Fijian populace, including young people (Ramesh, 2008: 118). Despite these complicating factors, the causes of Fiji's political and social troubles have been simplified into a narrative focused on the perceived risk of iTaukei becoming the minority population, resulting in conflict being represented as solely related to ethnicity when its basis had a great many number more roots. Through this lens the 'coup culture' (Robertson, 2012) that has developed in Fiji can be understood more deeply to reflect issues of inequality, uncertainty and instability.

Likewise, land rights offer a useful contextual starting point for understanding the Tension. The document produced by the ethnically Guale Guadalcanal Revolutionary Army in 1988 and again in 1999, 'Demands by the Bona Fide and Indigenous People of Guadalcanal', is largely seen to have been the first salvo leading to the Tension. It explicitly called for reparations for non-indigenous land use and greater sovereignty over land rights (Anderson, 2008: 4; Kaua and Sore, n.d.: 7). This document further speaks to political, social and economic drivers of conflict related to problems of institutional legitimacy, leadership and a clash of values between 'traditional' livelihoods structures and those embedded through colonialism (Hameiri, 2007). Again, this indicates that ethnicity was a corollary factor to conflict and not decisive in and of itself.

This is not to suggest that issues of, and tensions around, ethnicity are non-existent in Pacific societies. With deep cultural ties to land and concepts of land, links of indigeneity play deeply into understandings of rights, responsibilities and access. Further, my research has found ethnicity to be used to explain social attitudes and practices towards status and belonging. In Fiji, perceptions of inequality are often associated with ethnic overtones. As Usaia Moli, civil society activist from Fiji, told me: 'There are a lot of concerns [with] crime in the country and also poverty [among iTaukei communities]. Every time you speak to them about poverty, they will say, "Why are they [Indo-Fijians] doing well? Why are we not doing well?"' In Solomon Islands, negative attitudes towards ethnically Chinese Solomon Islanders act as a proxy for citizen frustration at perceptions of corruption, as discussed below. The extent to which the impact of this narrative is self-perpetuating on the youth populations that have been raised in the shadows

of coups and conflict – that is, how it impacts upon their views of fellow citizens of other ethnicities – and the impact this has on social capital is something that will need to be monitored over coming years.

Despite what appears on the surface to be a consensus that ethnic disharmony has been the driving factor behind civil unrest through the region, the evidence suggests that the causes of social rupture, including violence, are based in wider structural issues of opportunity and social perceptions of inequitable access to opportunity. These problems persist, with unemployment identified as the single greatest challenge youth in Fiji and Solomon Islands face by the majority of youth activists and advocates I interviewed, as well as across the urban, peri-urban and rural communities I consulted. Rather than this representing a straightforward implication that low levels of unemployment would solve youth issues, I took these responses as a proxy for fears about uncertain futures and growing inequality. As Jack Maebuta, a peace and education academic in Solomon Islands, told me: 'Unemployment gives birth to other livelihood issues'.

The interplay between civic engagement and employment can be seen as multi-faceted. With limited employment opportunities for young people, society as a whole risks limiting the participatory growth opportunities that would necessarily stem from an ever-expanding cohort of prosocially engaged citizens. Further, and possibly as a result, poor employment opportunities may also present conditions for civil disobedience with the potential to cause great ruptures through communities. Youth generations are facing significant social and economic issues that they will be required to address in the future but are currently left somewhat powerless to lay the groundwork to rectify at present. Rather than being played down as a factor of civil instability, a focus on ethnic tensions appears to obscure other factors that can be identified as fault lines for unrest.

Corruption, inequality and the status of Chinese Solomon Islanders

In Honiara, the most evident example of ethnic hostilities that I encountered resided not between the people of Guadalcanal and Malaita. In fact, the vast majority of Solomon Islanders I spoke with stated they felt no ill will towards other Solomon Islanders of different ethnicity. Rather, the greatest source of friction resided between indigenous Solomon Islanders and those of Chinese ethnicity, whether recent migrants or from ethnically Chinese families who have lived in the country for generations.

The superficial explanation for such sentiment typically revolved around the fact that Chinese-Solomon Islanders own and operate a number of businesses in Honiara that far outweigh their minority population status and that indigenous Solomon Islanders feel a cultural disconnection between the two ethnicities. Scratching the surface uncovers wider, structural links, however. Many inhabitants of Honiara see the ethnically Chinese population as symbolising the inequality and corruption that exists throughout the country. John Firibo, a youth group leader in Honiara, expressed to me that 'the involvement of the government with the Chinese people is getting at the nerves of the youth'. He elaborated that the relationship between Chinese-Solomon Islanders and indigenous Solomon Islanders was marked by power imbalances, where the ethnically Chinese use their business interests and economic superiority to suppress the indigenous populations. Discussing how the perception of corruption impacts youth attitudes to the national government, John offered:

> The parliament has recently voted for their salaries to be tax-free for the members. We were talking about that in our history class and we had a debate. It turns out that most students hate the government now and it's quite obvious because whenever they see a 'G'[3] in front of the vehicle they shout at it. They don't have the respect for the government.

Where I found the sentiment linking Chinese business interests and government corruption most often repeated was in short taxi rides around Honiara. When I asked drivers about the national government or unemployment, conversation would regularly turn to concepts of corruption and collusion between the government and ethnically Chinese Solomon Islanders. On multiple occasions taxi drivers would refer to the riots of 2006, which saw the Chinatown district of Honiara burnt down in

response to election results which were seen to be tarnished by unscrupulous deals between local politicians and Chinese businessmen (Smith, 2012: 95–96). Whenever I probed about how Solomon Islanders would react if corruption were seen to continue in the country, regardless of whether or not ethnically Chinese Solomon Islanders or their business interests had been discussed, the response always fell along the lines of, 'We'll probably burn down Chinatown again'. When I discussed these specific insights with Jack Maebuta, he corroborated the sentiment I had been exposed to. He told me: 'What I see now is that they [ethnically Chinese Solomon Islanders] are building and they are getting stronger and the resentment towards them is growing. I think if there is going to be another kind of unrest it will be like the general public are saying'.

Interestingly, at no stage in my interviews, focus groups or observations of development programmes targeted at youth in Honiara did I encounter Chinese-Solomon Islander young people. My only interactions with them came during financial transactions when they worked front-of-house in multiple stores I frequented. My lack of engagement with them may reflect their lack of direct engagement with development policies and programmes related to youth but may also be symptomatic of more distinguished cultural boundaries limiting inter-ethnic interactions.

Ethnic harmony

Despite the appearance that ethnic tension is the natural state of order across Fiji and Solomon Islands, it appears that harmony, in fact, represents the status quo for ethnic relations. This can be seen in the very fact that the instances of civil unrest are so easily identifiable; the coups of Fiji, including the looting behaviour of youth around the 2000 coup attempt (Dobell, 2007: 93) and the Tension of 1998–2003 as well as rioting in 2006 in Honiara are distinguishable not for their predictability but because such outbreaks of unrest and conflict pockmark otherwise relatively peaceful histories. The true tolerance of these communities is more evident in Fijian workplaces where Christian iTaukei and Hindu and Muslim Indo-Fijians share duties in saying grace before meals, allowing different gods to be addressed in different languages, and in the Youth Market in Honiara where Guale and Malaitan people buy and sell screen-printed clothing from one another, as well as socialise. Although these examples do not provide conclusive evidence of a greater tolerance of ethnic diversity by Pacific youth populations, they imply that ethnicity, alone, cannot be viewed as a necessary and sufficient cause of conflict. Underscoring the suggestion that ethnic tensions have been used as a convenient narrative to distract from the real sources of conflict related to livelihoods, Kaajal Kumar, a youth organiser from Fiji, told me, 'With young people, it is no longer to do with race. It is to do with development. It is not about Indians, it is not about Fijians, it is not about gender'.

Redressing the narrative that conflict between ethnic groups is natural is important to shaping how young Fijians and Solomon Islanders of all ethnicities interact and the opportunities that are made available to them. By accepting difference and engaging in everyday practices of cultural relativism, whether conscious or not, the risk of conflict is lessened as others understand the multiple and complementary worldviews of each community. As Maebuta (2012) writes, 'the common core to peace education and peace-building includes violence prevention, multicultural understanding, tolerance towards enemies and promotion of dignity and equality' (p. 94).

Conclusion

Pacific youth overwhelmingly engage in their communities in pro-social, peaceful ways. To continue this peaceful engagement requires political will and continued generation of livelihood opportunities. This is not only a matter of importance for the states of Oceania with large youth populations but for the broader geopolitical region. The swiftness of the deployment of RAMSI following the request for assistance from the Solomon Islands government shows just how important regional security is viewed by the 15 nations who contributed to the mission. And with increasing geopolitical contestation across and around the region (O'Keefe, 2015), its political and economic stability may result in

outsized influence on global international relations.

The conflicts experienced through Oceania in recent decades have been precipitated not only by social, political and economic changes, but also the perception of who has benefited from these changes. Applied PEA highlights that, although ethnicity has been used as an explanation for causing much of this unrest, it would be more accurate to link these instances of conflict to feelings of injustice and inequality being experienced by large swathes of populations. The high youth involvement in Pacific conflicts can similarly be explained through understanding structural barriers minimising young peoples' opportunities to create their own livelihoods and engage pro-socially with the state. Lack of opportunity begets disenfranchisement which increases the likelihood of conflict. Working as a vicious cycle, this conflict limits future opportunities and focuses state apparatuses on addressing security issues rather than working to create conditions for prosperity.

Given that the youth populations of Fiji and Solomon Islands have grown up during these periods of instability, legitimate concerns are held for how they may respond should livelihood opportunities continue to be low. Will the coup babies and those reared during the Tension promote peace and democracy as a result of the pained histories of their countries? Or might they be more likely to engage in the destabilising behaviours that have marked their formative years?

Increased employment opportunities and agreed land rights and usage would be welcome safeguards against future unrest, but only if they are seen to be equitable. What was clear from the interviews I conducted in both Fiji and Solomon Islands is that a key driver of instability in both countries was a perception that there was an unequal distribution of the benefits of social and economic change among certain communities. This includes by difference of ethnicity but does not view inter-ethnic interaction as a sufficient description for past violence. Similarly, it does not present as a likely fault line for future violence unless coupled with continued limited livelihood opportunities and/or growing inequality between ethnic groupings. It is perceptions of injustice and inequality which may well prove to be a greater indicator of the likelihood of future destabilisation than any material measure.

Noting that conflict is the exception rather than the norm shifts the pressure of how to maintain order and prevents simplified narratives that ethnic tensions or high youth populations necessitate conflict. Understanding that conflict occurs through the gradual erosion of peace and not simply in its absence suggests that peace can be maintained with well-designed projects and policies which assist at-risk communities. Crucial in this is providing livelihood opportunities and a sense of hope for Pacific youth.

Notes

[1] The 'Demands by the Bona Fide and Indigenous People of Guadalcanal', discussed later, was a document produced by a group of Guale activists asserting Indigenous land and economic rights.

[2] Highly concentrated homebrew alcohol.

[3] Government minister chauffeured vehicles carry licence plates beginning with the letter G.

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