New Zealand Postgraduate Field Research Awards

Research Brief on: Masta Liu; The Struggle for Identity of Solomon Islands Youth

---

Craig Hooper - Master of Arts, School of Geography, University of Otago

RESEARCH CONTEXT

The focus of the research is on youth development in Solomon Islands, specifically looking at Honiara. Honiara is the capital of Solomon Islands, drawing people from all other provinces based on the preconceived idea of opportunity. The latest census data showed the Melanesian nation has a total population of over 668,000, while the same data estimates Honiara's population at around 85,000 within a land area of only 22km. There are profound demographic challenges, with 55% of the total population being young people under the age of 24 (The World Bank, 2019). The services centralised in Honiara, e.g. education, employment, healthcare and support, are ill-equipped to provide to such a rapidly growing urban population. I felt that focusing on issues of youth development was an opportunity to give Solomon Islands youth a chance to share their experiences and stories. In addition, it provided an opportunity to speak with NGOs and the Government to find out what they are doing to address youth development issues.

DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY

First, we aim to explore young people's sense of place in Solomon Islands and how they construct their identity within a context of limited opportunities and social marginalisation. Second, based on their experiences and suggestion for change, we aim to provide strategies to alter young people's current opportunities in ways that speak to their needs and aspirations. In particular, the research addressed the following questions:

1. How do young people from the Solomon Island construct and perform their identity in relation to their sense of place?
2. How do young people envisage their future and what visions and suggestions do they have to ensure their needs and aspirations are addressed?
3. What role do both government and NGOs play for fostering youth development and adequate opportunities for youth in Solomon Islands?

Three types of participants were selected for this research, youth, NGOs and those working within the government sector. At the beginning of the research process, the youth defined age was set between 16-24. This range was decided upon because as I began to undertake research, I found that age is more a social construction in Solomon Islands and the idea of a youth is classified more on your stage in life. Using this age range would therefore allow me to open up the age demographic, allowing anyone who still associates as a youth to participate. In this case male and female were the only genders considered due to cultural norms of Solomon Islands. In total, 21 participants took part in research. Of the total, 14 were youths, 2 Government members, and 5 NGO workers.

Youth were selected for the purpose of sharing their experiences and stories. NGOs and the government personnel were selected on the basis of their role at the forefront of providing and improving services in Solomon Islands.

The method used was semi-structured interviews. I used question prompts that address certain topics, but for the most part played off the conversation that I was a part of at the time. Questions differed between both groups and developed based on how the interview progressed. NGO and government interviews were conducted across Zoom. These participants were stationed in Honiara. I was unable to travel to Honiara for research as previously planned because of Covid-related restrictions. Youth interviews were for the most part conducted in person, with a couple of exceptions. I travelled to Hamilton for a week where I conducted a number of interviews with students here in New Zealand on scholarship from MFAT. Others were conducted with students studying in Dunedin, and two via Zoom in Honiara. This gave me an opportunity to find students who are studying at a tertiary level, students who are at school, and youth not doing either.

KEY THEMES OF THE STUDY

Following the conclusion of the fieldwork, my research results can be broken down into the following key themes; The education sector; Employment opportunities; Support systems and mental health Identity amongst youth; Space, or the lack thereof; The gender and ableist experience; Cultured identities and urban migration; The role of NGOs; and The role of governance.

KEY FINDINGS

Education Sector – The education sector is in dire need of assistance. The focus is placed upon schools in Honiara, drawing people to the capital as they see greater opportunity than in the provinces. The research returned results that show classrooms that have been built for 20 students are being used for 35+, youth argue that teachers are not interested in teaching and helping, they are more interested in the job and money. There is a lack of accessible resources, including text books. One student spoke of how in her class there was one book for all the students, the class captain was given the book and asked to copy out notes for everyone. Though education is free, youth spoke of the difficulty of paying for stationary, transport and food. Students go to school hungry and are forced to walk long distances. To move from one year to the next, students must pass an exam. For those who pass, they get their choice of school. For those who fail, they are forced to leave school. Those who stay in school enter what can be described as a pyramid shaped system. This entails many schools that participants labelled as "average", and very few "great." Often for students who do not make it into the "great" schools, they see it as a failure. The dropout rate is remarkably high, and for those who do graduate, employment is severely limited.

Employment –Formal employment in Honiara is limited. Youth studying in New Zealand on scholarships spoke of their concern about returning home. Contracts require them to return home and work for two years. Many stressed their concern about going home and finding employment. One participant in particular told me that he had been offered jobs in New Zealand that he wish he could take. Another friend of mine who was in Honiara had studied in Fiji. Once he returned home with his degree, he was more content with working in his families phone repair store than finding a job relevant to his study area. He told me "it is a case of who you know, not what you know." For those unable to gain employment there are limited substitutes. As a result, such limited employment and with limited support, there are implications for mental health in a society not familiar with the term.

Support Systems – With such significant issues in regards to education and employment, there is a serious need for enhanced support systems. A number of youth spoke of how difficult it is to go to family for support because they do not want to disappoint them or show weakness. Others said it is challenging to go to teachers as they tend to be more focused on money and a job. Other than the possibility, but reluctancy, of family and teachers, there would appear to be no one for youth to confide in. I believe that with the utmost respect to tradition and culture, discussions of the factors that contribute to poor mental health and the resulting need for support networks is not necessarily a strong part of Solomon Islands society. A number of youth studying at New Zealand Universities spoke of how the idea of mental health and how support systems can help mitigate poor mental health did not become prevalent in their life until they reached New Zealand. I was told a number of stories from participants who have had friends end their own life, or are severely depressed. This is a country with clear developmental challenges that affect youth. While many appear to face struggles with mental health and often need support, unfortunately youth go on without it.

Identity – Identity is what makes us who we are, our likes, interests, and dislikes. Identity is created and altered by interactions, interpretation and institutions. They are therefore reactionary to our environment. If the environment for youth and their development is poor, such as the education, support and employment situation, this has a significant influence on the way a youth may feel, perceive life or react. Based on these interactions and condition of institutions, it is no surprise the outlook of life and perception of their country is nothing but negative. Though the youth I spoke to were of a very similar demographic, they stressed the way in which friends and family members have fallen into negativity. They spoke of how once youth are forced to attend the perceived "average" schools, fail to gain employment, and struggle to find support, they begin to develop a negative outlook on life and their own circumstances. As a number of participants went on to explain, it is following the period of negative perception that youth become involved in drugs, alcohol and socially deviant behaviours. The rest of society has established negative connotations representative of Solomon Islands youth.

18/02/2021

Moreover, what the rest of society is missing is that the circumstances of youth and their reactionary behaviour is not their own fault.

Space –Spaces are places where people feel safe, unsafe, where they go daily, and where they spend their time. This may include malls, schools, work space, areas around the city, home, a friends house etc. Space is an important aspect in the context of youth in Honiara. As discussed earlier, schools and work spaces are not necessarily readily available for youth. They have taken to associating other spaces as their own. Youth from Honiara told me stories of how youth spaces across the city are easily identifiable and associated with negative connotations from the rest of society. My research demonstrates that this negative portrayal is wrong and only gives one side of the story. Youth tell me that these spaces are not dangerous, and actually act to foster a sense of community. If they do not have schools, or work, they tend to hang with one another and talk about life and their experiences. This is very similar to how we may go out with friends for a drink, a coffee, or lunch. It is the actions of a few youth that have led to these negative labels and connotations of space in Honiara. They do not have a youth centre, common space with things for youth to do, and that is why they choose to spend time in the spaces they do.

The Gender and Ableist Experience – Though it would appear that all youth face struggles relative to development, my research demonstrates that women and those with disabilities have it much worse. A number of interviews I conducted were with young women who were studying at Universities in New Zealand, but have experienced living in Honiara. I was told stories of how young women were once able to roam Honiara on their own, walk to the local botanical gardens, hang with their friends until it was dark, and were not confined to certain areas. No longer can they roam the streets alone, the botanical gardens is now home to settlement communities of those who have migrated to Honiara in search of opportunities, and it is no longer safe for anyone to be out after dark. Both young men and women stated that it would be now uncommon to see a young women out on her own at any time of the day. They would ultimately be accompanied by a man. Many believe that the attitude toward young women comes down to culture and tradition. Women in general face oppression, violence, and a silenced voice. Such gendered oppression has significant implications on one's development, future, and personal identity. The oppressive behaviour is not restricted to women, as those with a disability face the same. They are excluded from society and there are limited services available for assistance. As an example, during Honiara's practice Covid19 lockdown earlier in 2020, those with disabilities were not forced to take part as they are not deemed to be a part of society. This left those with disabilities to wander the streets on their own while the rest of Honiara locked down. Such exclusion is only increasing with growing urbanisation and the further distancing of ideology and interpretation between generations.

Cultured Identities and Urban Migration –There would appear to be an idea within Solomon Islands that Honiara is the hub of opportunity. However, though it is the nation's urban capital, the quality of services is restricted to serve only a portion of the population. A number of participants explained that employment is even further restricted in the provinces, and the education system is quite basic, with schools often going without water, electricity and teachers. This would explain the high number of those migrating to Honiara. Such a perception has further consequences on the youth of Solomon Islands, especially from the older generations. With their parents having been brought up and lived through the colonial days, many youth believe that their success is measured based on their ability to gain an education and get a job. Youth are also under the impression that with urban migration, and the way in which their parents were raised, the nation is witnessing a change in cultured identities. Traditions and cultural beliefs are not passed down as they once had been. As such, there is somewhat of a disconnection between generations. One participant said the same things she had been taught, such as looking after the family garden, cooking, cleaning, and weaving, had not been able to be shared with her own children. If education and employment have increased in importance for society, then it is up to the government to ensure they are of the highest quality, giving everyone an equal chance to access the services.

Non-Government Organisations –My research suggests that locally operating NGOs in Honiara are doing far more for youth development than the government at present. The NGOs I spoke with have an undeniable dedication to helping youth. NGOs working with youth have taken on an advocacy role. The NGOs are led by both locals and foreign nationals, the important thing is they all share complimentary knowledge in regards to a stronger, more unified approach to youth development. As there is no communication or willingness to listen from the government a number of NGOs are taking points of concern passed on during workshops and trainings with youth to them. Other NGOs are offering spaces

18/02/2021

and activities that teach youth life lessons. Youth are able to express themselves through art, drama and photography as a few examples. As gang-related issues, drugs, alcohol, and violence become more prolific in Honiara, this type of support is needed more now than ever. The problem raised by the NGOs, however, is their inability to cope with the youth population. They do not have the funding, resources and space to help all. Youth are grateful for the work NGOs are doing, though they wish the Government would do more. What one NGO in particular stressed is the need for the government to take control, start implementing policies, and stop pretending the youth do not exist.

The Government –As the top of society, the leaders in the government have the knowledge and ability to change the current situation of youth development in Solomon Islands. Speaking with two members of the Government in high roles, they themselves know that not enough is being done. The Prime Minister gave a 40 minute speech last year on youth development alone. However, my research demonstrates that from the perspective of participants, though the government goes and says these things, they fail to implement any sort of youth focussed policies that empower and improve the development conditions for youth in Honiara. One government member spoke of their plans to ensure every student, no matter their background or gender, gets an equal chance in education. But based on what both youth and NGOs have stated, the Government has not had the best record with following through on plans they have outlined in youth focussed policies and speeches. One good thing the Government is doing is redesigning the sports hall in Honiara. Their plan is to make this into a space for youth, taking them away from the streets and giving them safe and relatable space. Hopefully this is the start of acting on plans they have outlined to improve youth development in Honiara.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The first recommendation is improving services and opportunities in the outer provinces. The research has shown that children and youth are often sent to Honiara by their parents so they can access education and employment opportunities. This is due to the poorer condition of the services available in the provinces. Jobs could be created in the provinces by improving the education sector and developing training initiatives.. A new area of demand is also developed, and acts as a potential tertiary opportunity for youth. By improving these services, the number of students travelling to Honiara is reduced, the chances of youth gaining an education and employment are increased, which therefore minimizes the anti-social behaviours that are growing in Honiara amongst young people.

Secondly, improvement is needed in the outcomes for young women and for peoples with disabilities. Society should look to ensure education and training is accessible to all young women across the country. There should be well paid quality work available, breaking down the stigma around women working. Violence and sexual violence toward women across Solomon Islands is extremely high, and greater work needs to be done to raise awareness of these harmful behaviours, increase education in schools, and make it safe to speak out. It would also be beneficial for young women to have role models in education, governance, and leadership roles, that way they can set goals based on seeing women in prominent positions. Finally look to find ways to involve and integrate disabled persons into society. Finding small employment opportunities, education, social opportunities, representation across society, accessibility, and promoting disability in schools would be beneficial and assist with normalisation.

Third, more youth spaces need to be developed around Solomon Islands, not just in Honiara. There are no spaces available for youth to relax in with one another. We know of spaces that come to mind when we think of youth spaces; malls, libraries, sports fields, and the movies. One participant told me that we cannot be surprised youth have a problem with alcohol as there are more bars and pubs than there are youth spaces. Though work is being done to develop the sports hall into a youth space, this is one location for thousands of youth. Across the entire country spaces need to be developed to give youth a common space. Establishing rules, responsibilities, and support in these spaces would benefit youth significantly. They would assist personal development, provide a safe space, and the opportunity to learn.

Fourthly, mental health services and support should be extended for everyone across the country. There is a clear connection between young people and poor mental health. This connection has not been accepted within society. Ensuring that there is either a reliable counsellor available at every school, or a number to travel between a selection of schools would be beneficial. Young people would have a safe space and a trained person to speak with and seek guidance. This will create more employment in a high demand and necessary sector. An additional subject that could be of focus for MFAT's scholarship options. Mental health also needs to be normalised within society, and greater education given from a young

18/02/2021

age. The more the ideas of what contributes to poor mental health are presented across the country, the greater the opportunities are for fighting back against it.

Finally, I recommend involving youth in decision making. The youth population is by far the highest it has ever been, and it will continue to grow. As such, they deserve representation and a chance to have a voice. Having a youth advocate or committee would ensure the youth voice is being heard and allowing a number of those a part of the committee to be young women would again boost their role within society. It makes no sense to have such an extensive youth population, for them to have no say in decision making. The majority of decisions made will at some time influence the youth. If you want the youth to be successful, then they need to be empowered.

RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

The most prominent limitation of this study was being unable to travel to Honiara. Had I been able to travel there, I believe I would have had the opportunity to collect more data and speak to a wider variety of people. As my data collection in person was restricted to within New Zealand, the youth that I spoke to are of a very similar demographic. I still had the opportunity to speak with youth currently in Honiara, who provided data, but due to technology and networking I did not speak to as many as I would have liked to. This also influenced the participation of Government and NGO participants. Though NGO participants were relatively easy to find and were more than willing to share their experiences, the same cannot be said for the government members. I would have liked to have spoken with more Government officials. Solomon Islanders are quiet and shy as it is, add on top of that a random person from Dunedin, New Zealand emailing you about an interview and research, it does not make things easy. I feel as if had I been in Honiara I would have had plenty of time to build trust and explain my research better. In the end I reached the desired sample size of both populations. I am satisfied with the data that has been collected.

CONSIDERATION FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

I do believe there is room for further research on this topic. Especially through travelling to Honiara. Though I am satisfied with the work I have done, I would have been satisfied to a greater extent had I had a chance to become immersed within the setting, and this would have likely made potential participants more accessible. Further research could look more in depth at the cultural aspects and transfer of knowledge with urbanisation. Further research could also look at support and mental health aspects of Solomon Islands.

REFERENCES

2019. Population Statistics, Solomon Islands. World Bank. https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=SB. Accessed: 13/08/20.

18/02/2021