

It is Genevieve Doni's second day in school. She looks unsure of herself, probably because she is 17 years old and only in primary school. Like tens of thousands of young people on Bougainville Island, Genevieve missed out on the chance of an education. She was born just before the start of a 10-year civil conflict over the independence of Bougainville from Papua New Guinea. When the time came to go to school the conflict was at its height. Genevieve spent her childhood hiding in the mountains and rain forests, trying to survive. Schools were burnt down and teachers fled. But now, things are different. She concedes she feels strange being in primary school, but even on her second day she is motivated. "I should be in secondary school, but I want to continue learning. I want one day to get a job in an office, so I can look after my family. Many of my friends are still out of school. I feel lucky."

(Source: UNICEF, Papua New Guinea, 2004).

There are many obstacles facing young people like Genevieve who want to get an education and a job in the Pacific subregion. The area is characterized by small, low income developing countries with high economic and political volatility. The 22 island nations cover about one fourth of the globe (30 million km², mostly ocean). The total population, excluding Australia and New Zealand, was about 9 million in 2005, more than two-thirds of whom were in Papua New Guinea.¹

Six states are ILO members: Fiji, Kiribati, Papua New Guinea, Samoa (previously Western Samoa), the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu.

The last decade has seen a rapid increase in the youth population (ages 15-24) of the Pacific Island countries. In 2005, 58 per cent of the population was aged 24 or under, and about one in five people were in the 15-24 age bracket. If current demographic trends continue the number of young people is expected to grow by 42 per cent between 2005 and 2050.²

Data collected reveals systematically higher open unemployment rates among young people than for those aged over 25. For example, in Papua New Guinea in 2000, young people were 2.5 times more likely to be unemployed compared to adults, and 49 per cent of those registered as unemployed were aged under 25.³

But statistics do not reflect the distress lack of work causes young people or indeed the difficult choices they face. The majority cannot afford to remain unemployed and hence are not registered as such. If they do not find a paid job they are expected to work the family land or take casual work.

Economic uncertainties and limited private sector development make it hard for young people to find formal employment. In Papua New Guinea, where only 58 per cent of children reached the last grade of primary education in 2002⁴, it is estimated that of the 80,000 young people who leave school every year fewer than 10,000 enter the formal labour market. Of the rest, some remain unemployed while some become self-employed. Others are under-employed in the informal economy - usually with low earnings, poor working conditions, no career prospects and uncertain social protection other than that provided by traditional social structures. Some also resort to illegal activities.

In Samoa only about 1,000 of the 4,500 young people who leave school every year are able to find work. In Kiribati where the total number employed in the cash economy is just 13,000, about 2,000 young people enter the labour market every year. In Vanuatu it is estimated that there are 500 new formal sector jobs available each year, leaving most of the 3,500 school leavers unable to find formal, waged employment.

These problems are compounded by a number of interrelated factors that go beyond population increase and uncertain economic growth. They include:

- Inadequate access to relevant education;
- Low levels of entrepreneurship;
- Under-employment, informal and low paid jobs;
- Social and cultural pressures;
- Rural-to-urban migration by young people;
- Emerging problem of child labour;
- HIV/AIDs; and
- Persistent gender inequality.

Last November we undertook a joint mission to develop a subregional programme to address the youth employment challenge in Kiribati, PNG, Samoa, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. After extensive consultations

the outcome was the “Subregional Programme on Education, Employability and Decent Work for Youth in the Pacific Island Countries”. This programme has three main pillars:

- Sharing and developing knowledge on how to address the challenges young people face in securing decent wages or self-employment;
- Capacity building and mobilization of governments, social partners and young people themselves to create a common policy framework and mechanism for the delivery of youth employment services; and
- Pilot interventions which enable young women and men to access skills that will help them get waged employment or become self-employed.

Across the Pacific subregion constituents have made decent work opportunities for young women and men a priority in their Decent Work Country Programmes and there are clear opportunities for the ILO to spearhead the UN’s role in promoting training and employment, particularly for young people.

The growing importance of a regional approach is reflected in the progressive harmonization of UN programmes, in particular those for young people. The need for the UN to work with governments and civil society to address these issues, particularly employment matters, is therefore a key element in the current Pacific UN Development Assistance Frameworks (2003 – 2007) as well as the Pacific Plan and the Pacific Youth Strategy 2010.

Though they might lack experience, young people tend to be highly motivated and able to offer new ideas and insights that can assist economic growth. Foregoing this potential is an economic and social waste. Greater access to decent employment means giving young people a chance to work themselves and their families out of poverty. Achieving decent work early in their working lives would help avoid a vicious cycle of unemployment or under-employment, poor working conditions and social exclusion. When there is widespread poverty and lack of opportunity the growing number of disaffected young people has been linked with a rise in urban crime, outbursts of ethnic violence, and political instability. Unless the causes and implications of the youth employment challenge are tackled, progress towards better economic and political governance in the Pacific subregion will remain uncertain.

In the words of one young delegate to the 2005 Pacific Youth Summit for the Millennium Development Goals: “What should be done to improve the lives of young people? More opportunity should be given to build confidence, skills and capacity. We are not the problem; we are the solution to the problems”.

¹ UN Population Division, World Population Prospects: The 2006 Revision Population Database (www.learnstuff.com/world-population-resources/)

² Ibid.

³ ILO, Key Indicators of the Labour Market (KILM) 4th Edition, Table 9 (www.ilo.org/public/english/employment/strate/kilm)

⁴ UNESCO Institute for Statistics (<http://stats.uis.unesco.org/>)