

Sandra Bartlett on youth and employment in the Solomon Islands

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The Solomon Islands has a young population, with recent census figures revealing more than 60% is under 25. Unemployment is a harsh reality facing the country's burgeoning young population, many of whom were denied an education and socioeconomic opportunities during the ethnic tensions of the late 1990s. Unemployment figures for Solomon Islands youth range as high as 75%. Training and education opportunities are in short supply.

Funded by AusAID's Pacific Leadership Program (PLP) and managed by SPC Solomon Islands in partnership with the Solomon Islands Government, Youth at Work provides mentoring, skills training and work internships to unemployed youth. The program aims to boost the long-term employment of youth and provide them with peaceful alternatives to the problems of unemployment. Sandra Bartlett is Manager of the Youth at Work Program based in Honiara, where she and her team support hundreds of unemployed youth in realising their livelihood potentials.

In this interview, Sandra spoke to the PLP about how Youth at Work is making a difference in the lives of the 'Master Lius' – Honiara's unemployed youth.

What's the situation like for young Solomon Islanders today? What are their biggest challenges?

I think the situation for youth in the Solomon Islands is difficult. Unless youth are exceptionally intelligent, they have no chance of making it to university. They were cheated of an education during the ethnic tensions. If they do finish high school, they have no choices. I really feel for youth because of their lack of options, whether it is in further education or jobs. There are youth participating in Youth at Work who are so creative, but there is no way for them to use their creativity to get jobs.

The biggest challenge facing youth is probably the challenges the country faces as a whole. Our young people were a forgotten generation after the ethnic tensions. As I mentioned, their education was [interrupted] and so they haven't gained any of the basic skills they should've learned in high school, or

even primary school. They don't have options and don't have the basic knowledge or skills to create their own options.

What does the Youth at Work Program do?

Youth at Work is a youth employment initiative that provides mentoring, job skills training and work internships for Honiara's unemployed young people. This is to support them in their pathways to livelihood. In the two, six-month phases of Y@W, 500 young Solomon Islanders have completed the program, taking up internships in various government departments, private businesses and enterprises around Honiara. They participate in weekly training involving CV writing, financial literacy, workplace ethics, environmental conservation, peace building and other topics for 20 weeks. From the first phase, which ended in January, 38% of participants have found permanent employment as a result of their work placements.

What role do you fulfil in Youth at Work?

As Program Manager, the Youth at Work team and I work really hard at implementing the program. We've seen youth change as they become economically empowered. We all have responsibilities in managing each of the four components of Youth at Work. The four components are mentoring, internships, training and creating a youth resource centre. As Manager, I have to make sure that each of the components is successfully completed.

What do you enjoy most about your work?

Working with young people can be very challenging but my favorite part of the job is seeing youth succeed in their internships, which in turn helps them change other parts of their lives. For example, many stop drinking on weekdays, stop smoking, and start leading healthy lives. On a challenging day, we only have to come into contact with one of our interns and be reminded of why we do what we're doing. It inspires us to work harder for them.

Apart from seeing young people become empowered, I think I also enjoy being extremely busy and being challenged by the many issues surrounding youth: trying to solve them or improve the situation. It may sound cheesy, but to do something so meaningful is a blessing.

As a young person yourself, how do you think Solomon Islands youth can be supported towards sustainable livelihoods? Also, what can youth do for themselves?

It's so difficult for youth – they really have been let down by society. But I think youth also need to stop being so down on themselves. There are many who don't need programs like Youth at Work to make differences in their lives and communities.

I think the right education would be the best way that youth can be supported towards sustainable livelihoods – this would help those who are still in school. For those already outside of the system, the first thing we need is a youth centre that can be a hub for all questions youth-related. Young people have no idea what options they have, so a centre could really benefit them. Many Youth at Work participants have been asking for some counselling, which would help them also.

One thing I've been encouraging youth to do for themselves is to create groups according to their interests, because being part of a group can help youth develop important personal and interpersonal skills. This would encourage them to think critically, solve problems, and have group responsibility. Groups also will help them gain confidence and self-esteem. They develop job skills, have leadership opportunities and, through collective action, they can advocate together and get noticed. This is one way that I think youth can start helping themselves.

How are participants responding to Youth at Work so far?

I think the response has been overwhelming. In [June] we had over 600 enquiries for this month's intake, so we've had to set up eligibility requirements.

Participants themselves have noted that they feel more connected and have learned a lot from the training. The biggest change we notice comes after they get jobs. Some of the jobs [may only be] working on the back of trucks carrying cargo, but the mere fact that they have purpose, something to do and are getting wages really empowers them.

What direction do you see Youth at Work taking in the future?

I see so much for Youth at Work. The first thing we're working on is setting up the resource centre for the youth, and also beginning an entrepreneurial component as part of internships. Youth at Work is based at the National Art Gallery in Honiara, with plans to convert the gallery space into a youth resource centre. Also, we're constantly looking at ways to improve the Youth at Work components, like providing training that will further assist youth in securing jobs and keeping them.

Youth at Work has also been a catalyst for youth development in Honiara – a coalition has been formed made up of government, development agencies and youth representatives working collectively to tackle youth unemployment on a national scale. The fact that we're supported by great partners, SIG (Ministry of National Unity, Reconciliation and Peace, Ministry of Women, Youth, Children and Family Affairs and Ministry of Commerce, Industries, Labour and Immigration) and PLP means we have been able to grow to support our participants, while also looking beyond at supporting youth nationally.

Sandra Bartlett is Manager of the Youth at Work Program based in Honiara.