

# PACIFIC YOUTH IN THE 21ST CENTURY: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

By 2030 it is estimated that the youth population in the Pacific Islands will have increased to 2.6 million in a total population of around 13.8 million – that’s an additional 696,000 young people over the space of 20 years.

AUT University’s Emeritus Professor Richard Bedford and daughter, Dr Charlotte Bedford, take a look at the various opportunities and challenges that youth population growth in the Pacific will have on the Pacific region.

Dr Charlotte Bedford, a researcher specialising in migration issues, is currently working with her father on labour migration in Pacific countries.



Emeritus Professor Richard and Dr Charlotte Bedford interviewing Tavanamalo villagers in Big Bay, Espiritu Santu as part of their field work project on the Recognised Seasonal Employer scheme.

By Richard and Charlotte Bedford

In September 2014, Samoa hosted the Third UN Conference on Small Island Developing States (SIDS) where more than 3,000 delegates focused attention on the sustainable development of SIDS through genuine and durable partnerships. A key theme for multi-stakeholder dialogue at the conference was social development, especially for youth and women. The focus on futures for Pacific young people is a central theme of the Asian Development Bank’s mid-year review of Pacific economies and the establishment in New Zealand of a new commissioning agency, Pasifika Futures, to enhance the welfare of Pacific communities in this country.

During the first half of the 21st century there will be a significant shift in the distribution of youth across the region (including Australia and New Zealand). Projections by the United Nations Population Division forecast major growth in numbers of people aged between 15 and 24 years, especially in Melanesia. A major opportunity, as well as a challenge, for these countries is how to leverage the “demographic dividend” that large youth populations can bring. The opportunity is to draw on the innovative potential that young, active, constructively engaged minds can bring to bear on issues affecting families, communities and the wider national society and economy. The challenge is in ensuring young people can gain access to training and employment in ways that enable them to fulfil their potentials and aspirations.

In 2010, when the population of the Pacific Islands reached 10 million for the first time, 1.86 million (just under 19 per cent)

of the total were aged 15-24 years. This compares with a youth population of 3.8 million in Australia and New Zealand (14 per cent of their combined total population of 26.8 million). By 2030 it is estimated that the youth population in the Pacific Islands will have increased to 2.6 million in a total population of around 13.8 million – an additional 696,000 young people compared with the number in 2010. The difference in numbers of people aged 15-24 years in the islands between 2010 and 2030 is projected to be larger than the difference in numbers in this age group in Australia and New Zealand (513,000) despite the fact that their combined populations (estimated to be 33.5 million in 2030) will be more than 2.5 times larger than the projected Pacific population of 13.8 million in 2030.

The great majority of Pacific youth live in Papua New Guinea (70 per cent in 2010) and this percentage is projected to increase (74 per cent in 2030 and 78 per cent in 2050). It is estimated the youth population of Papua New Guinea will be more than 600,000 larger in 2030 than it was in 2010. By comparison, the youth population of Micronesia and Polynesia combined is likely to be around 6,000 larger in 2030 than it was in 2010.



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– Emeritus Professor Richard Bedford.

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