

Youth Employment Policy Brief: Pacific Island Countries



International
Labour
Organization



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Youth unemployment is a major concern in the Pacific Island Countries and global climate change only exacerbates the situation. Pacific Island Countries are expected to severely deteriorate the natural, human, and financial capital they possess, and reduce the economic growth and income opportunities for young people. At the 2005 Pacific Islands Forum, the leaders of Pacific Islands reiterated youth as a priority for regional action in the ten-year Pacific Plan 2006-2015, and Education Ministers in the Pacific endorsed a 2009-2012 Development Framework in 2009, which highlighted the urgent need to better prepare young people for both formal and informal employment through improved education and training. ([Lin Lean Lim, 2011](#))

Youth Unemployment and Underemployment

Pacific Island Countries have some of the smallest economies in the world, and there are limited income and employment opportunities. Exacerbated by the youth bulge, youth unemployment and underemployment issue is of particular concern. The unemployment rate in the 15-24 years old age-group is on average double that of the total workforce whose age group is between 16 and 64. ([UNICEF, SPC and UNFPA, 2005](#)) The youth unemployment rates are 18.7 per cent in Fiji (in 2012), 6.7 per cent in Kiribati (in 2005) and 16.1 per cent in Samoa (in 2011). ([KILM](#)) With the annual population growth rates between 2.2 and 2.7 per cent, more than half of the total population is under 20 and a fifth of the total population is between 15 and 24 years old. ([ILO, 2010](#)) It is expected that the Pacific youth population is expected to increase by 50 per cent by 2020. ([UNDAF, 2013](#))

Over the last 10 years, the population growth rates have exceeded the economic growth rates in Pacific, and the increasing number of new labour force failed to enter the labour market. ([ILO, 2010](#)) Many young Pacific people have been frustrated with the lack of employment opportunities, and the Governments of Pacific Island Countries are concerned about that the frustration could turn into self-harm, anti-social behavior and social conflict and violence. ([UNICEF, SPC and UNFPA, 2011](#)) The recurring political instability and violent conflict is provoked by the unemployed, underemployed and alienated youth, so securing employment of youth is critical for the social stability in the Pacific. ([UNDAF, 2013](#))

Underemployment and precarious, informal working conditions of youth could be more serious problems than open unemployment. ([Lin Lean Lim, 2011](#)) Few young people find employment in the formal sector, and most Pacific youth work in the informal economy, such as subsistence production and other cash earning activities for their families' and own survival. These jobs are often linked with lower wages, poor working conditions and limited career prospects. ([ILO, 2010](#))

Young Women

Young women in the Pacific face greater difficulty in finding decent employment than young men. It is noted that women's participation in the labour market is less than a third of total share of employment in Fiji, Marshall Islands, Samoa and Solon Islands. ([ILO, 2009](#)) Women are disadvantaged in seeking employment because of low level of education and lack of employable skills as well as cultural aspect stereotyping women for domestic work. Young women commonly find employment in low-wage and vulnerable employment in the informal economy. ([ILO and ADB, 2011](#)). Young women's labour force participation rate is 31.3 per cent in Fiji (in 2012), 52.5 per cent in Kiribati (in 2005), 31.4 per cent in Palau (in 2005), 32 per cent in Samoa (in 2012), 41.8 per cent in Solomon (in 2012) and 50.8 per cent in Vanuatu (in 2012), which is lower than that of young men as 57.7 per cent in Fiji, 52.9 per cent in Kiribati, 54 per cent in Palau, 53.5 per cent in Samoa, 56.7 per cent in Solomon and 62.8 per cent in Vanuatu. ([KILM](#))



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Labour Migration

In Pacific, many young people move to towns, cities, and overseas in search of jobs. The concentration of young people in the adult population is greater in urban areas, affecting overcrowding of urban housing and infrastructure as well as high rates of unemployment and crime, resulting in little law and order and government instability. ([Lin Lean Lim, 2011](#)) On the other hand, rural areas suffer from the shortage of workers for agriculture and food production. ([Lin Lean Lim, 2011](#)) For external migration, Pacific youth choose Australia and New Zealand as primary destinations, but the work regulations in both countries are getting increasingly stricter. ([Piyasiri Wickramasekara, 2013](#))

Child Labour

Child labour exists beside youth unemployment in the Pacific. Children are expected to work for the household at an early age in the Pacific. ([Moushira Khattab, 2006](#)) Culturally, girls are expected to help their mothers cultivate food plantations, do house chores and take care of their siblings at home. Poverty not only leads children to work on the streets selling flower garlands and souvenirs to tourists, but also seek employment as prostitutes. ([Coutts, G., 2006](#))

Education and Skills Development

Young people have generally benefited from more formal education compared to older age groups but still face difficulty in continuing their education due to limited access to schools and cost of education, especially for secondary and higher level of education. ([UNICEF, SPC and UNFPA, 2011](#)) Solomon Islands had less than five per cent of youth population completing secondary schooling ([Solomon Islands National Statistics Office, 2009](#)) and Vanuatu's gross enrolment rate in secondary schools was 47 and 44 per cent for girls and boys respectively in 2009. ([UNESCO](#))

The tertiary education participation rates are low in the Pacific. Palau had a tertiary participation rate of 38 per cent; Fiji, Marshall Islands and the Federated States of Micronesia, 15-17 per cent; and Samoa and Vanuatu, 5-7 per cent. ([UNESCO](#)) There are also limited training programmes which could equip young people with employable skills in the Pacific. As there are few job opportunities even for technical and vocational education graduates, TVET education needs to be improved by partnerships with the private sector. ([Secretariat of the Pacific Community, 2009](#))

Government Priorities

Some Pacific Island Countries developed national development frameworks with special attention to youth employment issues. For example, Kiribati and Vanuatu introduced Kiribati Development Plan (2008-2011) and Vanuatu Priorities and Action Agenda (2006-2015) emphasizing youth employment issues. ([Secretariat of the Pacific Community, 2009](#)) All the ILO member countries in the Pacific – Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Palau, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu – developed National Youth Policies, but some of them are under revision. The National Youth Policies included development priorities to enable environment for developing and empowering youth to full potential for future contribute to national development. They emphasize the rights of youth and importance of TVET education and skills and entrepreneurship training and education to tackle the youth employment crisis in each countries.

To better develop and support small businesses, the Federated States of Micronesia, Republic of Palau and Republic of Marshall Islands opened Small Business Development Centre (SBDC) as a part of The University of Guam Pacific Islands Small Business Development Centre Network (PISBDCN). ([Lin Lean Lim, 2011](#)) PISBDCN run two projects for youth including Shell LiveWire Business Planning Competition and entrepreneurial training for youth at risk. ([Lin Lean Lim, 2011](#))



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Fiji

Fiji had a youth population of 156,000 and its youth unemployment rate was 18.7 per cent in 2010. ([KILM](#)) In 2011, Fiji adopted a national youth policy recognizing the current status of youth and aiming to holistically develop the young people to become resourceful and effective members of society. It supports the role of the National Youth Council and aims to empower youth and provide better livelihood opportunities through education, life skills training and sports and cultural activities.



Kiribati

Youth population in Kiribati is 19,367 and its youth unemployment rate was 6.7 per cent in 2005. ([KILM](#)) The Government of Kiribati launched a national youth policy for 2011-2015 with the aim of providing vocational and life skills training, creating decent employment and entrepreneurial environment for youth and nurturing youth participation in community, institutional and at national level decision making process to respond to the needs of Kiribati young people.



Republic of Marshall Islands

In Marshall Islands, 70 per cent of the total population of 55,000 is under 29 years old. ([EPPSO, 2007](#)) The Government developed a National Youth Policy 2009-2014 addressing the needs to improve formal, informal and non-formal education and training and expand livelihood opportunities with employment preparation and vocational training for young people. Marshall Islands also established National Youth Congress to foster youth participation in national and local development.



Republic of Palau

Palau has a youth population of 2,051 and youth labour force participation rate is 31.4 per cent for women and 54 per cent for men in 2005. ([KILM](#)) Palau launched its national youth policy in 2005 based on understanding of major youth problems such as increasing unemployment and substance and alcohol abuse. The Government aims to strengthen technical vocational education and training and foster employment and income-generating ventures for the young citizens. ([Republic of Palau and the SPC, 2009](#))



Samoa

Samoa had a youth population of 36,000 and youth unemployment rate was 16.1 per cent in 2011. ([KILM](#)) Through the 2001-2010 national youth policy, Samoa highlights the provision of employable and livelihoods skills education and training and supporting sustainable income generating activities of youth and youth health issues. ([Cameron Noble, 2011](#)) Recently, the Government also adopted entrepreneurship and financial education into the school curriculum and provides apprenticeship training schemes for youth.



Solomon Islands

With a total population of 515,870, Solomon Islands had 29 per cent of youth population aged 15-29 years and 40 per cent of population under the age of 14. ([MYWCFA, 2010](#)) In 2010, the National Youth Policy was adopted, aiming to provide improved and equitable access to education, training and employment opportunities and decision making process for young men and women. The Government set a few youth organizations to realize the policy including National Steering Committee and National Youth Congress.



Tuvalu

Tuvalu has 9,561 people and many people migrate to neighboring countries because of climate change. ([ILO, 2010](#)) There are high levels of under-employment in the labour force as private sector is not well-developed. Tuvalu developed a national youth policy in 2005 but it is currently under review. To tackle the youth unemployment issues, the Government employed young people for temporary work and has negotiated with international shipping companies to support employment of Tuvaluans. ([ILO, 2010](#))



Vanuatu

19 per cent of the total population in Vanuatu is youth aged 15-24 years, and only nine per cent of 15-19 year-olds and 23 per cent of 20-24 year-olds are in paid work. ([Vanuatu National Statistics Office, 2009](#)) After launching a national youth policy in 2007, Vanuatu focuses on establishing a national youth data base, promoting youth development and employment through technical and vocational education and fostering youth identities based on cultural heritage. ([Vanuatu National Statistics Office, 2009](#))



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The UN and Youth in Pacific Island Countries

Thirteen United Nations agencies and international organizations work on the economic, social and cultural development of Pacific Island Countries under the United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF). Many PICs chose focus UN assistance on priority entry points such as youth employment and climate change adaptation under UNDAF 2013-2017. ([UNDAF, 2013](#)) The United Nations system aims to promote the capacity to create economic opportunities and decent work for the youth by supporting sustainable livelihoods, employment generation, financial services and entrepreneurship.

The ILO in Pacific Island Countries

The ILO is responding actively to the enormous problem of youth unemployment in the Pacific. In 2010, at the Tripartite High Level Meeting, participants emphasized youth employment to promote decent work for sustainable development of the region. ([ILO, 2009](#)) The ILO participated in development of National Youth Policies of the Pacific Island Countries and run the Pacific Youth Employment Project. Currently, the ILO runs three projects in the Pacific and aims to involve more actively to tackle the youth employment issues.

Policy and Programme Recommendations

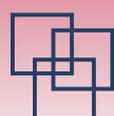
As part of [the United Nations System-Wide Action Plan on Youth](#), the following activities can be conducted to support youth employment in Pacific Island Countries.

- Developing a reliable labour market data and information system on youth employment.
- Building employment services and centers for youth.
- Developing a demand driven, coordinated and inclusive TVET system.
- Providing entrepreneurship skills development programmes to promote youth entrepreneurship.
- Strengthening the capacity of the social partners and promoting tripartite solutions for youth employment at the local level.
- Advocating for a national policy on youth employment and promoting mainstreaming of youth issues into the National Employment Programme.
- Providing information sessions and trainings on migration for youths and supporting the creation a legal migration system to prevent exploitation of the migrant workers.

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