Introduction

The participation of young people in Fiji has often been understood by the general public to be tacit. This is because in their transitionary path to adulthood young people engage in 'performance and responsibility' (Theis 2007:4), the process of acquiring and exemplifying acceptable roles and conduct. This conventional process is deemed necessary before young people 'come of age'. As a result, young people are often perceived as a homogenous group. Global transformations have seen the emergence of new and different groups of young people who challenge the rhetoric and reality of being young, influencing the creation of new pathways and opportunities. This illustrates that neither the conventional view of young people nor their developmental paths are uniform. Resourceful as they are within their social spaces of existence young people are participating in diverse ways — adapting, resisting and carving out new identities as either individuals or collectively.

This phenomenon is unfolding progressively in Fiji, perhaps occurring at a rate that research struggles to keep abreast of. At the outset, there is a dearth of information about young people in Fiji,[1] let alone research that captures the different aspects of youth and being young. This paper, a direct response to these knowledge drawbacks, is informed by a desk review and my direct involvement and research experiences with young people who in Fiji, are defined as persons between the ages of 15 and 35 years and comprise one third (296,892) of Fiji's population (FIBS 2010; DYS 2011). This definition is adopted in this paper because it incorporates the social and cultural dimensions of being young.

In this paper, I attempt to generate some discussion, preliminary in nature, about the landscape of young people's participation, both historical and contemporary. I argue that an understanding of young people's participation should move beyond the dominant discourse of 'performance and responsibility' and, in doing so, identifying some structural and policy challenges to this case. The discussion will focus on the relationship between young people and wider society, exploring the interplay between structure and agency experienced within their lived reality. The paper concludes with a discussion of how an appreciation of young people's diverse existence and involvement establishes the beginning of genuine partnerships with them.

I maintain that the ideas to be explored in this paper are critical to understanding the avenues for young people's participation and accompanying challenges. This is because when compared to developed countries young people in Fiji although framed as a public policy issue are still left out of key participatory mechanisms and initiatives. The subtle elements of 'governmentality' (Foucault 1991), the process of governance and citizen self-governance, and occasional policies that react to their perceived 'at-risk' status remind us of their existence. In reality, young people are at the forefront of conventional rhetoric associated with development concerns such as rural–urban migration, unemployment, poverty, crime, and sexual and reproductive health, to name a few. Their 'participation' has often been touted by good governance advocates and development agencies in the search for solutions. Informed understanding of young people's participation has often been missing from this puzzle. This paper seeks to redress this.

What is Young People's Participation?

Young people's participation can be defined in a number of ways. The varying definitions are intrinsically linked with the way young people are conceptualised: either as passive individuals or as socially active agents with the ability to make sense of and understand the world around them (Christensen and James 2000; Christensen and Prout 2002). Institutions, organisations, academics and practitioners at the helm of young people's participation also contribute significantly to how the involvement of young people is understood and approached.

The reviewed literature presents diverse views about how young people participate. These range from their merely having a presence and being part of activities to being actively involved and contributing to the decision-making process at different levels of society (Golombek 2002:8). Others argue that youth participation only takes place within the realm of organisations. A rather useful suggestion is made by Reddy and Ratna (2002) through the 'ecology' of participation approach. Here, young people are viewed as active 'political, economic, ecological, socio-cultural and spiritual (religious) beings' with the potential to maximise their 'personhood' through their interaction within their many spaces of existence (Reddy and Ratna 2002:4). On the whole, young people's participation is often understood in three major ways: individual, collective and institutional (Bell 2008). Drawing from these views, I adopt a general definition of participation referring to 'acts that can occur either individually or collectively, that are intrinsically concerned with shaping the society that we want to live in' (Vromen 2003:82). The definition moves away from traditional understandings of participation and lends credence to the exercise of young people's agency.

How does youth participation work in practice? Individuals and organisations have attempted to capture this by outlining the nature and degree of participation. Arnstein (1969) was the first to develop a ladder of citizen participation comprising eight rungs.[2] Hart (1992) developed a modified ladder of participation with emphasis on children

and young people's participation, including their involvement in research. Critiques of these models label them as Eurocentric and more a description of 'the role of adults viz a viz children's participation, rather then the levels of participation of children' (Reddy and Ratna 2002:4). Given the context-specific nature and degree of young people's participation, groups like the 'Concerned for Working Children' have developed their own model of child and youth participation[3] (Reddy and Ratna 2002: 16). De Kort (in Holdsworth et al. 2007) also offers a two dimensional structure based on five[4] levels of participation and nine organisational areas where the former can be applied. In their review of the youth participation literature, Bell et al. (2008:31) suggest that there are two dominant views: 'youth development and youth involvement approaches'.

Why is young people's participation important? Apart from becoming a clichéd term for the meaningful development of young people, participation has some tangible benefits. The practice of participation allows young people to take ownership of their issues and lives, be listened to by adults, to have their views considered, and be partners in decision-making. In addition, it can be empowering and educational, inculcating in young people values that foster tolerance, respect and goodwill. As an Australian study concluded:

> Young people who are engaged and provided with opportunities to participate, experience a better quality of life and contribute to creating and building better communities … they feel connected to family, friends and their community and have better health and mental health status as adults (Burns et al. 2008:4).

In considering the case of Fiji, the benefits of participation are critical because young people continue to be socially passive, economically dependent and politically under-represented and insecure (Adinkrah 1995; ECREA 2002; SPC 2009). But what does this mean for young people who are already participating perhaps in non-traditional forms and making meaningful lives for themselves? Are they known? Are their stories being told? In this context, participation for whom and for what become the crucial questions.

Young People's Participation in Fiji

Young people's participation in Fiji should be understood against the different periods of development that have characterised the country's history. There is often a tendency to speak of traditional or historical and modern Fiji, referring to both time (pre- versus post-independence) and physical space (rural versus urban). In fact, much understanding about young people in the former period continues to influence that of the latter. One view permeating these periods is reflected in the phrase 'young people are seen and not heard', well documented in the writings of Ravuvu (1983); Lasaqa (1984); Adinkrah, (1995) and Toren (1999). These authors depict the subordinate position of young people in traditional Fijian society, one that is played out within the spatial sites of youth socialisation and associated imageries and rules that govern their place within the *vanua*,[5] the home, church and the school.

The conventional position of young people in Fiji is highly influenced by status differentiation characterised by 'rank, seniority and gender' (Toren 1999:116). In indigenous communities, young people affectionately referred to as *cauravou* (young men) and *goneyalewa* (young women), occupy a subordinate position and play a passive role. Young women are further disadvantaged because of their gender. In general, young people's participation is limited to providing the much-needed labour for subsistence and economic activities and for ceremonial purposes (Ravuvu, 1983; Lasaqa, 1984; Monsell-Davis, 1986). There are exceptions as there are communities in Fiji where youth groups have become active in roles relating to HIV/AIDS prevention (Vula 2011) and poverty eradication (Silatoga 2011). Their decision-making contributions are also accounted for at the different levels of local *iTaukei*[6] administration. Young people have representation at *Yasana* (province), *Tikina* (district) and *Koro* (village) levels. But their presence is largely tokenistic. In referring to one of these meetings, a leader in Carling's (2009) study echoed that:

> … they [the meeting] talk about very broad policy issues and perhaps they should be concentrating on things that affect people's everyday lives, youth employment, that sort of thing, and, [o]ften in terms of say 'youth representative', first, it sometimes leaves a lot to be desired, the 'representative' is not a young person and secondly, he or she often feels intimidated because they are only one person.

This quote brings to the fore central concerns about young people's participation in Fiji; the spaces of participation, the categories of young people that do so, and how and why they participate. These questions need to be considered within the current political context of Fiji[7] — its suspended democracy since 2006 and its government's policies of establishing a non-racial political order. The issue of ethnicity cannot be played down in any discussion pertaining to Fiji. The diverse ethnic make-up of Fiji's young population, specifically that of the two main groups, *iTaukei* and Indo-Fijian, are acknowledged. The discussion refers to Fijian young people in general, making reference to ethnicity where necessary. I propose that conversations about young people in contemporary Fiji need to go beyond limiting constructs like ethnicity and the binaries of the rural versus urban and employed versus unemployed. Young people of diverse backgrounds exist in Fiji today and this discussion should be read with this context in mind. I begin by exploring the interplay between 'traditional' spaces and young people's participation.

Traditional Spaces of Youth Participation — Who is Doing What?

Education and Training

Children and young people spend most of their productive hours in schools and 'educational' institutions. In Fiji, the education system, a legacy of the colonial period, has been about educating children for the working world, adulthood and becoming 'good' citizens. Children are 'to be educated according to the wishes of their parents' (Fiji Government 1978). The priority for most parents, therefore, would be employment — preferably white collar employment.[8] This is obviously the case for Indo-Fijian parents. As Lal (2010:197) succinctly puts it, 'education [is] one commodity the Indo-Fijians

valued more then any other. It [is] their passport to hope'. Indo-Fijian young people take ownership of their education and strive to succeed. Whilst the *iTaukei* are seen as being more complacent about education, there are those who value education as much as Indo-Fijians.

Young people's participation in Fiji schools range from passive to active involvement. This is influenced by the school participation space they access and corresponding manifest and latent functions of their involvement. Schools offer extra-curricular activities like sports, art and music. Some students go on to develop careers in these areas, but there is little evidence of how the majority benefit from these activities in their post-school years. Institutionalised processes of student representation, such as student leadership and student councils, offer students some avenues of having a say and making decisions about issues that affect them. It is perhaps fair to suggest that the latter processes benefit those that meet the criteria for participation; in most instances, there are confident and articulate high achievers. The nature and extent of participation in schools are useful to know in order to determine students' input in their learning experiences and their contribution to the community at large.

Higher education has been known to influence the development of independent, creative and critical thinking. The University of the South Pacific (USP), established in 1968, offered many young people this opportunity. Outside the classroom, students expressed themselves in the form of creative writing, many examples of which were published in *UNISPAC*, the campus newspaper (Subramani 2011). Young students at this time were excited about how their new-found knowledge could be used to shape the future development of the country. In addition, forums like that which was hosted at USP in 1973, focusing on social issues in national development, provided the impetus for discussion and debate. Individuals who became prominent academics and human rights activists, such as Vanessa Griffen, Vijay Naidu, Jone Dakuvula, Brij Lal and the late Amelia Rokotuivuna, emerged during this era.

Similar initiatives in the form of the Niu Waves Writers Collective, formed in 1995 attempted to continue the legacy. Despite its early success, the group now cease to exist. It appears that places of higher education such as USP suffer from a culture of convulsion as a result of continued political setbacks in Fiji. The political contribution of university students has been curtailed. However, there exist different expressions of youthful collective creativity today. This will be discussed later in the paper.

The current government, in an effort to make education relevant, has, in the past few years, introduced some innovative policies. Fiji has adopted Classroom Based Assessment, and will soon be offering civic education as part of a revamped curriculum. The latter is being developed as part of the In-School Citizen Education Project, one of the three[9] projects under the Fiji Good Governance Programme. Citizenship Education integrated into the school curriculum is intended to imbue students with the knowledge, values and attitudes that would make them become 'better informed, committed and responsible citizens' (FGMOE 2008:97). This appears to be the first attempt at institutionalising civic education in Fiji. It is understandable that Fiji's current political climate necessitates such an initiative, but it will be some time before its intended outcomes are realised. The development of Classroom Based Assessments and in-school civic education may appear progressive, but the developments remain as part of the old ideals of education, about preparing children and young for future roles as responsible citizens.

Remaining in school, attending higher education, or registering with initiatives such as the National Employment Centre (see next section) often absolves young people from what Young (in Harris et al. 2010:12) calls 'civics deficit'. This derives from the view that a sound education will eventually lead to the attainment of paid work. Bessant (2004:390) echoes this succinctly by saying that 'citizenship is gained through employment, a living wage and an adequate standard of living while it also demonstrates the value of being moral, independent and able to meet one's civic

responsibilities'. My own reflections support the positive sentiments tied to paid work in Fiji, but this discourse demands some scrutiny as it exists as a double-edged sword. Paid work is layered, from those with formal tertiary qualifications holding professional positions either in the civil service or private sector to those with no or limited training working in factories or as security guards. Many, particularly rural dwellers, fail to understand the distinctions around paid work and the circumstances around someone's work; to them, paid work is paid work. As a result, employed young people are glorified, but at the same time more is demanded of and from them. How young people respond to these family and communal demands is unknown.

Government-Specific Youth Initiatives

In February 2012, the Fiji Government created a Ministry of Youth and Sports (MYS) and subsequently appointed a cabinet minister to oversee this portfolio. These developments were a welcome surprise for young people and youth advocates given that over the past years 'youth and sports' was a department under the larger Ministry of Education, Culture and Heritage, Youth and Sports. According to government sources, a Ministry of Youth and Sports was necessary because of the growing youth population and the need to 'prepare' young people for the promised democratic elections in 2014 (Fiji Government Online 2012). These propositions are debatable but are beyond the scope of this paper. Whilst 'new' policy directives of the new ministry are awaited with anticipation, the discussion in this section draws from previous and existing government initiatives for young people. For relevance, 'ministry' is adopted in place of 'department'.

The MYS is mandated to enhance and promote the development of young people in Fiji through policies and programmes. The National Youth Policy provides an overarching influence on the ministry's activities which at present focus largely on empowerment and attending to the needs of rural young people. In carrying out its youth development mandate, the ministry offers programmes and services, such as the National Youth Service Scheme and the Duke of Edinburgh Program.[10] It assists in developing collective youth participation through the Youth Club Registration Scheme and youth involvement in the voluntary sector through the Voluntary Youth Organization Grant.

In 2009, the government established the National Employment Centre[11] (NEC) to address unemployment. It is estimated that about 22 per cent of Fiji's youth population is unemployed. This equates 'to [about] 35,171 young people aged 15–24 years' (Carling, 2009:7). This figure excludes those engaged in subsistence and those not seeking any form of formal employment. Few jobs are available and only an average of about 2,000 new jobs are available for the 17,000 school leavers every year (Mausio 2003). NEC acts as a ' "one stop shop" … to actively engage Fiji's unemployed in meaningful economic activities…' (Fiji Government Online 2011a). Whilst the NEC caters for the general population, the majority of its clients are young people who make up the 20,000 individuals who have registered at one of the seven centres around the country (Moceica 2011b). Once registered, individuals undergo three phases of training comprising counselling and an aptitude test, two weeks of life skills training, and a six-month work attachment programme (Fiji Government Online 2011b).

The NEC adopts a youth development approach, and its achievements are well publicised in the media. There have been stories of graduations and employment successes for its clients. Since November 2010, about 300 individuals registered with the NEC have gained employment in the tourism sector (Vosamana 2011). This approach to youth unemployment brings with it an element of 'governmentality'. 'It is compulsory for unemployed young people, either high school-leavers or tertiary graduates, to register with the National Employment Centre' (Fiji Times Online 2011). Apart from the promise of employment, young people appear to have acquiesced to the process, merely registering, attending training workshops and attachments. Secure and sustainable employment for NEC graduates is critical to enhance their ability to engage with society at large.

The MYS has made every attempt to encourage youth participation at the decision-making

level.[12] Two such initiatives include the National Youth Parliament (NYP) and the National Youth Advisory Board (NYAB). Fiji has hosted three national youth parliaments in the past, but the absence of parliamentary democracy and the subsequent withdrawal of donors have brought this activity to a halt. Young parliamentarians had been enthusiastic about the youth parliaments, but Carling (2009:101) suggests that '… few outcomes have been seen in terms of impact or actual changes in the development agenda'. I have also raised questions about the meaningful participation of young people in such a forum elsewhere (Vakaoti 2007). An ongoing challenge to youth forums such as this lies in the lack of meaningful acknowledgement by those in leadership positions (Carling 2010). The NYP was one way of identifying and nurturing youth leaders, and its premature end does not augur well for the critical leadership situation Fiji currently experiences. An NYP alumni was formed in 2006, but no details are available about its activities and current situation.

The NYAB, established in 2004, is now disbanded. This body, formed through a cabinet directive, offered young leaders the opportunity to discuss youth issues and as a collective be the voice of young people, offering relevant advice to the minister for youth. The failure of the NYAB was attributed to the communication challenges between youth groups and their representatives, the lack of funding for policy-based research, and the persistent view by adults questioning the credibility of youth leaders (Regu 2011). Given these and other challenges, the NYAB voted to reconstitute itself and revive the National Youth Council (NYC), first established in 1960, in its place. At present, the MYS is facilitating this process, acting as secretariat to the interim NYC committee. The structure and direction of this new council is being eagerly awaited by young people, excited about the prospects of national youth-led organisation.

Faith-Based Involvement

Faith-based organisations have had a long history of community involvement in Fiji. For example, their contribution to education is significant.

Together with non-government organisations (NGOs), they operate and manage around 98 per cent of schools (FGMOE 2008). Christian churches in particular have a high degree of youth membership and is perhaps the space that many young people occupy outside the home and school. Different churches involve young people in different ways. For example, the Seventh Day Adventists involve young people through their Pathfinder Ministry, whilst the Methodist Church has a Youth Fellowship division. With their best intentions aside, Carling (2009) makes the point that churches merely use young people for fundraising activities and events. While there is some element of truth in this assertion, churches do provide much more in the way of participation for young people.

It is common knowledge that the place and role of young people, particularly in the mainline churches, reflect wider societal attitudes towards youth, hence disillusionment on the part of some. Pentecostal and evangelical groups appear to offer young people an alternative. The theology of these churches contradicts many traditional and customary practices, having a direct influence on the ceremonial and traditional role of young people. However, anecdotal evidence shows that young people are fully engaged in these churches, which appear to be more in touch with the 'needs' of young people today. These include acceptance, free expression during services and opportunities to be directly involved in church activities like outreach work. To understand this trend, it is important to ask what the attraction of these churches is, what activities young people do, how they feel about their involvement, and how they see their future. The scope of this paper does not allow for an exploration of these questions, but they remain relevant in understanding the relationship between young people's engagement in religious spaces.

Volunteering and Civil Society Engagement

In Fiji, volunteering exists as the most common form of youth participation. Volunteering takes place within CSOs, local communities and the church, to name a few. A World Bank study in 2008 revealed that many young people are engaged as volunteers in Fiji. Of the young people surveyed,

41 per cent and 56 per cent of respondents in Suva and Namosi (a rural province on Viti Levu, Fiji's largest island) respectively were involved in some form of volunteer work. These included village construction and beautification projects. In Namosi, the participants felt exploited about having to spend their time and energy on such activities. Young people in Suva, on the other hand, saw volunteering as a pathway to securing formal employment (Jayaweera and Morioka 2008). Youth volunteering has shifted; it is no longer about the spirit of free giving, but is fast becoming a means to an end. The situation of disgruntled young people in rural areas as illustrated by the case of Namosi is not isolated, it is symptomatic of what other rural young people face.

How can volunteerism be made relevant as an integral part of young people's involvement? This is a challenging question given the diversity of voluntary spaces. Making rural voluntary work appealing for young people is, perhaps, a greater challenge given the expectation of 'performance and responsibility' in that context and the limited opportunities for engagement available to them. The urban area, a more restraint-free environment, offers for young people greater choices. In fact, they are at liberty to shop around for activities that reflect their needs and interests. NGOs like the Ecumenical Centre for Research Education and Advocacy (ECREA), Citizens Constitutional Forum (CCF) [13], Really Make a Difference (MAD), Kids Link, Youth Champs for Mental Health (YC4MH) and others offer young people the space and opportunity to be involved with a range of issues and activities that include, peace building, leadership, social inclusion, human rights and the environment. This supports the observation that 'children and young people are active participants in their social worlds, and hold important views and engage in important practices on political matters' (Harris 2009:224).

In recognition of the role of voluntary sector, Fiji's first National Volunteer Centre was opened in January 2010. The centre is supported by the Fiji Council of Social Service and funded by Vodafone ATH Fiji Foundation. The centre aims to encour-

age volunteerism amongst unemployed young people as a path to securing employment (IAVE 2010). The partnership between the Fiji Council of Social Service and the Vodafone ATH Fiji Founda-tion created much publicity about corporate social responsibility. This has brought a new dimension to volunteerism, with young people identified as a niche to realise this. To an extent, corporate social responsibility has made volunteering trendy; what I refer to as the 'new cool'. In this context, volun-teering hardly takes place without publicity either through advertising or media coverage. Volunteers receive gift packs for their involvement and corpo-rations gain business mileage. Many young people are drawn to this new form of engagement, in doing so making significant community contributions.

Historically, 'festivals' in the forms of beauty pageants and fundraising events have been signifi-cant in community calendars around the country. The major ones include 'Back to Levuka Week' in Levuka, 'Bula' Festival in Nadi; 'Sugar' Festival in Lautoka, 'Friendly North' Festival in Labasa, and the 'Hibiscus' Festival in Suva. Given its size, the 'Hibiscus' festival is dubbed the 'mother of all fes-tivals'. Over the years, this festival has also been 'rebranded' thus appealing to a wide cross-section of citizens. Aside from members of the public who flock to the festival venue during the week of fes-tivities, the event's success is premised on a number of factors, three of which include the sponsors, the volunteers who organise the event, and the contest-ants. The contestants are the public face of the festi-val; this aspect has offered a new dimension to the notion of youth participation.

In recent years, Hibiscus Queen and King con-testants, as part of their public appearance roles advocate issues of concern to society. In 2011, the festival committee partnered with UNICEF Pacific and adopted the theme 'Our children our future, love and protect them'. This gave contestants the opportunity to raise awareness and the profile of child protection in the county. They became medi-ums, in this case for UNICEF. Public judging pres-entations revealed that contestants varied in their understanding and knowledge of child protection issues. Whilst the festival theme was relevant, one

wonders how young people in the latter group would sustain their passion for child protection, once they returned to normal life. It is well known that many young people experience moments of epiphany when participating in such events. The existence of the youth organisation 'Charity Champs',[14] could offer a glimpse into what former contestants who are members do to sustain their civic engagement.

Politics and Young People — the Unknown

Fiji's political history is well documented. However, for reasons unknown, literature on Fiji's political history has failed to offer any detailed analysis about young people's involvement in politics. It is known that during the years of active party politics, political parties had youth 'wings', where youth representation was either tokenistic or influential. Pareti and Frankel (2007:101), writing about the Labour Party observed that '… Labour's National Council [comprised] 42 members … two representatives each from women and youth members of Labour'. One would assume that youth representatives and young political enthusiasts had very little influence on party deliberations and outcomes. Lal (2010), in writing about Jai Ram Reddy and the politics of post-colonial Fiji, makes mention of the influential National Federation Party's (NFP) Youth Wing. Although brief, the discussion touts young political activists as influential given the ability of NFP Youth Wing to orchestrate the removal of the party leader in the mid-1980s.

One environment where young people have been known to 'do' politics is at the level of university student representation at the University of the South Pacific (USP). Lal (2004), reflecting on his years as an undergraduate student at the University of the South Pacific, expresses how education offered many young students at the time the zeal and passion for free expression. He shares that 'there were people writing about poetry, plays … our sentiments expressed in our creative work related to our identity and to important social and political issues of that immediate post-independence period or pre-independent period' (Lal 2004:237). Such sociopolitical consciousness

was evoked with the formation in 1988 of the USP-based Fiji Youth and Student League. The league was very much an Indo-Fijian youth group with a strong ethnic stance, but it sought to become the critical voice of students and young people. However, the 'spirit of independent inquiry' (Lal 2004:237), which characterised student university experiences during these times, has lost its appeal. Perhaps young people's general lack of historical involvement in institutional political processes, market-led employment and Fiji's continued political turmoil has contributed to their social and political apathy. Independent thinking and creativity are now appearing in new ways, particularly in the form of popular culture.

Since independence in 1970, Fiji has held nine general elections. But many young people today have not had the chance to vote in an election. It is assumed that youth voter turnout in the 2006 elections would have been high as the Elections Office made every attempt at registering all eligible voters especially young people. In 1996, the total population of children in Fiji under the age of 15 years was recorded at 35.4 per cent. The number of young people over the age of 21 years in '2006 would have been considerable' (Nicholl 2007:63). In Fiji, voting in many instances is tokenistic. A young person who has had the opportunity to vote had this to say, 'most young people vote for the same political party as do their parents, or, if they have a relative running for Parliament, are compelled to vote for them' (Jayaweera and Morioka 2008:19). In addition, young people exist as a 'social group' vulnerable to political manipulation. The involvement of young people in the riots that followed the civilian coup of 2000 is a testimony to this.

The promise of electoral reform and general elections in 2014 are being awaited with much anticipation by Fiji's general public. Many see these as indicators for a return to 'democratic' rule. A recent contested Lowy Institute Poll on Fiji confirmed this view (Hayward-Jones 2011).[15] It is difficult to gauge specific reactions by young people to these developments, but from conversations one gets the impression that many are excited about voting. Jayaweera and Morioka (2008:19) add that

young people are 'politically aware and interested in creating a political system that allows for their voices to be heard'. This is because many have not had the opportunity to vote. They see this as an opportunity to contribute to the shaping of a 'different' Fiji. The number of young voters will increase given that the age of suffrage has been reduced from 21 to 18 years. Young people will surely be a political force to reckon with if they exercise their right to vote accordingly. These developments require preparedness; organisations such as the CCF are assisting in this process through community education and awareness programmes. Young people are excited about being young and 'having a say', but in light of Fiji's current political situation it is difficult to ascertain the nature and degree of their political character. How they will organise themselves politically and who they will vote for are two of the many questions that confront contemporary Fiji.

The Modern Landscape — Being 'Young' and Shifting Boundaries

In contemporary Fiji, a growing number of young people are engaged in ways that do not fit the dominant perceptions of youth involvement. Either through some structural predicament or the exercise of agency, young people are shifting the boundaries of participation. Based predominantly in urban areas, these young people 'do' and 'make' identities. This section will briefly discuss four categories namely: young people on the streets, commonly known as 'street kids'; those involved in the rising urban popular culture; those organised as a collective in youth-led groups, and young aspiring leaders.

Street-Frequenting Young People — Making Identities

Street-frequenting young people are perhaps the longest surviving group of young people engaging in 'active citizenship' such as shoeshining, pushing wheelbarrows and engaging in petty crimes. These young people are considered problematic and 'at-risk' because they are not at home, school or the village; they exist in a consumer space as 'non-consumers' (Vakaoti 2008). Despite opposition to their existence, these young people are 'creating' and 'making' identities. There are few youth-friendly amenities that meet their needs. As individuals or collectively, these young people have developed a sophisticated mechanism of existence and resistance in what they call the 'system'. Their means of survival varies; some include shoeshining, begging, petty crime and menial work. Street-frequenting youths have also developed networks of relationships with business owners and charitable groups for the safekeeping of shoeshine boxes, cheap meals and laundry services. These young people are fun-loving and thrillseekers. They often display these traits via their indulgence in alcohol, cigarettes and drugs, sexual promiscuity, gambling, play-fighting and intercity travels. The number of street-frequenting young people is expected to increase in Fiji given current economic difficulties and political uncertainty. The absence of any directed policy initiative complicates efforts of understanding and partnering with them.

Popular Culture and Young People

Modern developments in Fiji have generated spaces for young people's expression in popular culture, specifically in music, communications, dance, fashion and the arts. Often there are fusions of the traditional and the modern in their representations. For example, lyrics by local rap artists including Sammy G, Mr. Grin and Red Child are dominated by Fiji-specific colloquialisms describing life as young people understand it. Fashion is inspired by local designs and materials, while there is a burgeoning contemporary art rooted in traditional mysticism. These activities are conspicuous and attract the public gaze, particularly from adults and other young people schooled in the ways of 'old'. Fijian popular culture, representing some continuity from the past, is not only a form of expression but fast developing as a commodity. The involved young people have found themselves a niche in the aesthetic spaces of urban Fiji.

Youth popular culture in Fiji is supported by the entertainment sector, tertiary institutions and the few elite consumers. In addition, synergies have been created between young people and corporate interests. For example, the Fiji Fashion Week, a limited liability company, offers young people

the platform to participate either as designers or models. The Oceania Centre for Arts, Culture and Pacific Studies (OCACPS) at USP opened up its creative space about a decade ago for aspiring artists, carvers, dancers and musicians. OCACPS recently consolidated its programmes with new developments like a new music recording studio and Fiji's first professional art gallery where many young artists exhibit their work. In 2011, the Fiji National University hosted its first ever Film and Music Festival and has plans for developing an 'arts' city within its School of Communication and Creative Arts (Moceica 2011a). Other initiatives such as the Kula Film Awards are gaining popularity and pushing the boundaries of youth participation.

Young people are the largest consumers of information and communications technology (ICT). This has increased interaction and made information more accessible. Mobile communication has bridged the gap created by physical distance, connecting young people more than before. Cyber interaction, restricted mostly to the urban areas because of accessibility has granted many young people increasing national and international connectivity. At the same time, they gain access to news and information they would not have otherwise been exposed to given media censorship in Fiji. Facebook is popular with many young people creating and maintaining individual accounts; young people with shared social and educational interests have also established group accounts. However, there is limited research into understanding the relationship between young people's participation and ICT. One thing is certain though: virtual participation offers young people, especially youth-led groups, the freedom and flexibility to participate in an environment without 'borders'.

Youth-led Organisations

Young people in Fiji have also been active in forming their own interest groups and organisations. This development has been influenced by rights-based and youth involvement approaches. Youth-led organisations are different from the typical church, sports and village youth groups. They are more issues-based and often engage in activities that fall outside of 'normal' youth activities; at times they run the risk of being 'othered' (Vromen 2003). These groups advocate and discuss topical issues such as human rights, the appreciation of difference, climate change, decision-making, democracy and mental health to name a few.

The first known child/youth-led initiative was Kids Link. It was established in 2002 following a Save the Children Fund supported Children's Forum. Kids Link has been active in organising media campaigns and workshops raising awareness about child protection and other issues involving children. The organisation has branches in Suva, Lautoka and Labasa (Save the Children 2011). In August 2011, Kids Link launched a membership drive campaign in Suva, the first public exercise to attract more members. This is in response to the current situation where 'many children don't know about Kids Link Fiji. And for those who do, they don't know what role they can play in it or what we do'[16] (Elbourne 2011). Many former Kids Link members have gone on to assume influential roles in Fiji's government or non-government sector.

Another youth-led group, YC4MH, formed in 2008 following a 'National Youth Forum on the formulation of a National Suicide Prevention policy' (YC4MH 2011). The organisation focuses on suicide[17] prevention and creating a socially inclusive environment for young people with mental health issues (YC4MH 2011). The organisation is staffed by youth volunteers and partners closely with the government through the St Giles Hospital (Fiji's only mental health hospital), donor agencies and other youth networks. Volunteers known as 'youth champs' are strong advocates of the group at workshops, festivals like the Hibiscus, through the media and via social networking.

Contemporary developments and challenges have given rise to youth political and queer activism in Fiji. This is a shift from the known passive position taken by young people with the exception of youth wings as discussed earlier. With some support from business and community organisations, young sexual minorities (gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender) are beginning to mobilise themselves against bullying and intimidation. They

do this through awareness raising at events like the 'Adi Senikau' pageant, featuring transgender people, and social networking evidenced by the formation of the Drodrolagi (droMo) Movement at USP in 2010.[18] As a social and supportive network, droMo is committed to 'building [a] strong youth and community movement and working on social justice and human rights for those with diverse sexual orientation and identities' (Pacific Scoop 2011). At USP, the group exists alongside dominant cultural and faith-based groups. How they negotiate their existence in this environment will determine their success beyond gates of the university.

In 2005, a handful of young activists formed the Young People's Concerned Network Fiji' (YPCN). The YPCN identified itself as 'a group made up of strong minded and strong willed young people of Fiji who are concerned about issues that affect them and are willing to stand up for these ideals and make their voices heard' (YPCN 2011). YPCN came to prominence in 2006 for its active pro-democracy campaigns but was effectively silenced and suppressed under the Public Emergency Regulations; a few of its members were physically and psychologically abused by the military. In recent months, YPCN has resurfaced, together with other youth and human rights activists and organisations in the Pacific region, calling for the release of five youth activists detained by Indonesian authorities since 2010 for raising the West Papuan Liberation flag in West Papua. This raises the question of Pacific and regional youth networks, perhaps a topic that warrants further exploration.

Young people involved in queer and political activism in Fiji risk their freedom. Venturing out of the comfortable positions of traditional youth participation is brave, exemplifying confidence and maturity. Perhaps this is the result of greater sociopolitical awareness by some of Fiji's young people. Though a minority, these young people have become the voice of their peers too fearful to 'speak' out. The impact of their work is difficult to gauge because queer activism occurs within a conservative cultural context and political advocacy in a very clandestine manner. However, these activities illustrate the possibility of young people's involvement, their power and quest to be active players in shaping their future and that of the country.

Youth Leadership Training

Leadership, once the domain of a privileged few, is now more accessible than before. Many young professionals have enrolled in leadership training programmes that are gaining popularity in Fiji. The extent to which these programmes are a response to the country's leadership dilemma is unknown. It is, known, however ,that Fiji needs to develop a cadre of modern and professional leaders. Directed youth training programmes have been developed in response to this. Some programmes include leadership training by Leadership Fiji and the Fiji Women's Rights Movement's Emerging Leaders Forum (Vakaoti and Mishra 2009). The programmes are known to imbue participants with many leadership qualities and offer them networking opportunities. However, the programmes appear elitist and biased towards urban young professionals. Leadership training for rural young people appears to be non-existent; where it does exists it is performed within a traditional system that is losing favor with young people. This is the enduring challenge for young people's participation in Fiji: how to successfully negotiate between the past and the present?

Where to From Here?

Drawing from what is available and known, the landscape of young people's participation is diverse, alive and vibrant. However, highly subscribed forms of participation are those related to mainstream institutions and tied to dominant perceptions about young people's 'responsibility and performance'. Influenced by the youth development approach, young people are viewed as passive and 'adults in waiting', to be equipped with skills and knowledge that support the status quo. There is no argument that many young people 'succeed' and become 'good citizens' as a result.

Other young people, either as a result of structural predicaments or personal agency, choose to exist as 'everyday makers'. These young people are active in choosing their forms of participation or the organisations they align themselves with. These

forms of involvement and engagement often exist outside the norm. However, in the fields of the arts and fashion they have been acknowledged by and partnered with development and commercial interests. The meaningful engagement of young people rests in acknowledging their changing socioeconomic and cultural reality. Adopting a definition that moves beyond the 'good' citizen rhetoric makes it possible to acknowledge their agency in their multiple spaces of existence. This view is succinctly described by Vromen (2003:81), who echoes that 'it is through the knowledge of current practice that we can both realise a new understanding of how young people practice participation and implement policy which facilitates active participation in areas of relevance to the lives of young people'. In this regard, what decisions might significant partners within young people's network of existence consider?

The call for greater and more equitable participation of young people is often seen as a direct challenge to 'things' Fijian. This is a myth and should be dispelled. Many young people are aware that traditional practices and beliefs form their identity. They, in return, encourage its protection. They go further to suggest that culture and tradition need to be balanced with their social reality, youth issues and international principles (SPC 2009). This acknowledgment of cultural dynamism is necessary to ensure that young people and their different forms of engagement are acknowledged. This outlook strengthens rather then weakens cultural ideals like *veirogorogoci* (listening to each other) and *veinanumi* (being considerate of others) (Ravuvu 1998). It also supports the National Youth Policy which attempts 'to facilitate equal opportunity for participation in leadership and decision-making processes at all levels' of society (DYS 2011:2). The challenge rests with making this happen.

The MYS is doing its best within the confines of its mandate and limited resources. Work with young people is guided by a policy that has identified priority areas for youth development and guiding principles towards achieving this end. The policy, however, appears to exist at a superficial level, without any real analysis of the situation of young people and specific policy directions. This opens the MYS to criticism for not performing its role and attending seriously to young people's concerns. In addition, the policy is all about, 'supporting', 'promoting' and 'encouraging'. The language couches young people within the discourses of 'futurity' and 'governmentality' (White and Wyn 2004). Viewing young people in terms of the future and attempting to prepare them as responsible adults fails to account for what and how they do things in the present. This is what many 'active' young people object to.

Who are these 'active' young people? Because of limited research, not much is known. It is recognised that young people, individually or collectively, are involved in different spaces and with varying degrees of participation. The majority are traditionally involved, whilst the minority do 'other' things in alternative spaces. For reasons of convenience and resourcing, many programmes and activities benefit young people in urban areas. Rural youth groups are supported by the MYS but only after meeting certain requirements. Financial limitations and geographical isolation limits how they can engage. For their urban peers, participation has become a niche 'industry'. Those familiar with this scene often engage in what I refer to as 'organisational hopping'. This refers to the fluid movement of young people between organisations. Reasons for this are currently unknown in Fiji, but it can be assumed that young people engaged in this activity 'shop' around for organisations that meet their interests, employment and voluntary needs. In doing so, they create an in-group of young people often privileged over their peers. Research in this area is crucial to developing an understanding of who the different groups of young people are and their motivations for engagement.

Developing meaningful participation for young people needs to begin with what is already known. The absence of documented good practices and differences in engagement between the different social groups like gender and disability does not

leave us with much to start from. The media, in particular the print media, publishes many 'feel good' youth stories. Whilst these stories showcase what young people are doing, many fall within the 'performative' aspects of being young; many articles discuss the benefits of young people's contribution to society at large as opposed to how participation benefits them. Publicised activities fall within normative practice, often failing to discuss the benefits for young people as opposed to society at large. Stories are presented as if young people owe society everything they do. Young people should be encouraged and assisted to claim their rightful place in these stories. The same goes for young leaders whose stories need to be documented and shared. These will provide alternatives to adult conceptions of what and how different young people are doing things.

Young people are often heard saying that they are the best people to consult when discussing issues and solutions that concern them. But very few opportunities exist that allow them to do this. The 'active' voice of young people varies in Fiji. One way of consolidating their voice is to engage them in research, not only as participants but as co-researchers. Globally, young people are engaged in research ranging from traditional surveys to more participatory and user-led forms. Research as a space for young people's participation in Fiji is gradually gaining recognition. Historically they, like other members of the community, have been passive participants in research. I am of the view that this stems from two reasons: that research is seen as the domain of the learned few, and that young people have little to offer. This view is changing, and genuine partnerships with young people — those that seek to celebrate the different ways in which young people are involved — could do well to acknowledge the potential of research as a participatory space. Similarly, the soon-to-be-formalised NYC and other organisations that purport to support youth involvement could do well to invest in this process towards better understanding the needs and issues of the young people they serve.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to offer a preliminary map of the landscape of young people's participation in Fiji. The information discussed is not exhaustive; it has generated some initial thought upon which further conversations and research in the area can build. This discussion suggests that the traditional forms of engagement by young people have shifted and spaces where they participate and 'do identities' have widened. This is the result of the interplay between institutional and organisational developments and young people's agency. Mindful of existing policy and sociocultural challenges, it would be fair to suggest that discussions about young people's engagement should move beyond the normative understandings and indicators of participation. In order to develop meaningful partnerships, stakeholders need to view every act of 'being' and 'doing' on the part of young people as meaningful existence and involvement.

What does this suggest for society's engagement with young people in contemporary Fiji? To what extent will this discourse be acknowledged given Fiji's sociocultural and political reality? To what extent will public policy reflect young people's diverse forms of existence and contemporary engagement amidst existing policy limitations? Should Fiji develop good practice principles against which young people's engagement can be measured? Many more questions can be posed. However, it is vital as a starting point to place young people at the centre of discussions about their existence and involvement. A conversation with young people is long overdue and, once initiated, will contribute to a greater understanding of their sense of historical engagement and future participation. Contemporary Fiji owes at least this much to its young citizens.

Acknowledgements

Author Notes

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Endnotes

1 The latest work on young people in Fiji is by Carling (2009), shedding some light on the importance of acknowledging young people's citizenship and participation and the implications if these are ignored.

2 Arnstein's eight rungs consist of manipulation, therapy, informing, consultation, partnership, delegated power and citizen control (Arnstein 1969).

3 This model emphasises the role of children in participation as representing themselves, being represented through their organisations or representing their organisations (Reddy and Ratna 2002).

4 The five levels include: non-participation, passive involvement, influence, partnership and self-mobilisation.

5 According to Ravuvu (1988:7), 'the "vanua literally means land, but also refers to the social and cultural aspects of the environment. On the social plane it includes the people and how they are socially structured and related to one another. On the cultural plane it embodies the values, beliefs and common ways of doing things'.

6 In an official government decree of 2011 indigenous Fijians are now known as *iTaukei*. This contrasts with Fijian, which refers to all Fiji citizens. Ethnic categorisation in Fiji has always been very sensitive, and this legislation has not been widely accepted in Fiji. To illustrate this, a recent study by the CCF revealed that 82 per cent of those surveyed believed that only *iTaukei* can be considered Fijians (Moceica 2012)

7 For a detailed discussion of this, see SSGM Discussion Paper 2008/1, by Brij Lal, and SSGM Discussion Paper 2011/6, by Mosmi Bhim.

8 There are a few isolated cases where, due to religious convictions, parents have kept their children from school and 'schooled' them according to the teachings of their faith.

9 The other projects include the 'Support to Parliament Project' (currently suspended) and the 'National Initiative on Civic Education (NICE)' project. The projects are being managed by the United Nations Development Programme and funded through the European Union and NZAID (UNDP 2011).

10 Other programmes and services of the Ministry can be found at <http://www.youth.gov.fj/programmes.aspx>.

11 NEC replaced the Youth Employment Opportunity Centre, initially housed at the Department for Youth & Sports.

12 It is understood that National Youth Policy consultations were undertaken with young people in 2011. No available record or documentation of this process is available. This makes it difficult to assess if the process was based on the meaningful participation of young people.

13 CCF is a non-governmental organisation that works in the area of democracy, human rights and multiculturalism. More information about CCF can be found at <http://www.ccf.org.fj/article/news/>.

14 Charity Champs is an organisation formed in 2008. Membership is open to former Hibiscus contestants.

15 The Poll has received support and reactions from prominent commentators on Fiji like Jon Fraenkel, Wadan Narsey and Croz Walsh. Their responses can be found at these respective web links: <http://crosbiew.blogspot.com.au/2011/09/doubting-tomasis.html>; <http://intelligentsiya.blogspot.com.au/2011/09/dr-wadan-narsey-shoddy-tebutt-opinion.html> and <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/

16 This statement was made by Save the Children Fiji, Child rights manager Josaia Tapueluelu at the launch of the campaign (Elbourne 2011).

17 Suicide rates in Fiji are alarming. In 2011 there were 48 suicides and 109 attempted suicides. In the first two months of 2012 there have been 15 suicides and 11 attempted suicides (Gopal 2012).

18 droMo builds on the legacy of the Drodrolagi Association originally established at USP in 1997 (Bale 2010).

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