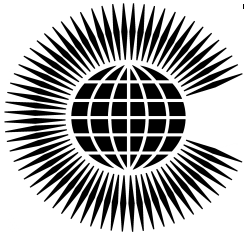


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YOUTH AND PEACE-BUILDING:

A CASE STUDY FROM THE PACIFIC

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YOUTH AND PEACE-BUILDING: A CASE STUDY FROM THE PACIFIC

1. Introduction

Conflict in the region

In recent years Pacific Nations have experienced conflicts, involving arms that have thrown these normally peaceful states into violent societies, riddled with human rights abuses, political chaos, economic destruction, lawlessness and the loss of security. Peace is something not taken for granted anymore; the region has been rocked by outbursts of violence such as the burning down of shops in the Honiara China Town in Solomon Islands in April 2006 (related to a change in government) and the burning down of the Vanuatu Supreme Court in June 2007¹ over political, land and unemployment matters.

Many of the conflicts are the result of government developments, policies and decisions² and these conflicts have exploited young men to perform acts of violence and many atrocities and young women to suffer physical and sexual abuse.

The cycle of violence in the region began rather mildly with the 1980 'Coconut War' of Vanuatu³ instigated by local Chief Jimmy Stevens who tried to prevent Vanuatu from acquiring its political independence from the British and French governments. Although it was more a war of bows and arrows it was still significant to a peaceful country not prepared for such drama. Fiji was next when in 1987 it underwent two coups, was suspended from the Commonwealth and later reinstated. But things never really returned to normal and in December 2006⁴ it experienced its third coup. Political and racial difference by power holders in the Fiji Government and Military contributed very much to this nation's conflicts.

The Bougainville crisis of Papua New Guinea occurred in 1988 due to disagreements by landowners with the Bougainville Copper Mine (the leading revenue collector for the PNG government at that time) and the PNG Government over royalty payment arrangements resulting in violence. It ended nine years later making it was the longest running conflict in the Pacific region.⁵

Neighbouring Solomon Islands followed suit when in April 1998, armed groups of angry youths from Guadalcanal Province forced neighbouring Malaita Province settlers from Guadalcanal leading to the displacement of approximately 20,000 Malaitans and many from the other provinces of Solomon Islands. The major factors in the conflict were land and other problems alleged to be caused by Malaitan settlers on Guadalcanal and perceived inability of the government to effectively address long term grievances of Guadalcanal.

¹ Radio New Zealand International, The Voice of New Zealand, Broadcasting to the Pacific, June 7, 2007

² A study undertaken for the Forum Regional Security Committee in 1999 concluded that the major causes of conflict in the Pacific over the last 20 years has been due to a combination of ethnic tensions, land issues, economic disparities, and lack of confidence in government. Many of these factors were prevalent in your country before the 2000 Solomon Islands crisis.

³ www.internationalaccommodation.com/Article/, Colonial History of Independence,

⁴ Kaplan M, The Coups in Fiji : Colonial Contradictions and the Post-Colonial Crisis 1988, vol. 8, n°3, pp. 93-116 (1 p. 1/2)

⁵ Ewins R, Pacific Politics, the Bougainville Conflict, December 9, 2003

The cycle of conflict and violence seems to be spreading to Polynesia with the Tongan uprising in November 2006 when local youths went on a violent rampage through the streets of the capital city Nuku'alofa, resulting in the deaths of six young Tongan men, the conflict a result of opposition monarchy rule in the kingdom.

Conflict in Solomon Islands

The Solomon Islands conflict was between two distinct provincial militant groups, the Malaita Eagle Force (MEF) from Malaita Province and the Isatabu Freedom Movement (IFM) of neighbouring Guadalcanal Province. It started in 1998 and ended in July 2003 with the arrival of a regional intervention force, the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI) in the country.

Before the conflict Solomon Islands was a peaceful home to people of different races, cultures, languages and customs. For many years these ethnic groups lived in harmony. Over the years, however, Malaitans became the focus of resentment by people from other provinces especially Guadalcanal Province on which many Malaitans had settled. Known locally for their hard working nature, Malaitans have accessed employment opportunities easily and generally dominate top positions both in the private and public sectors of Solomon Islands.

After the Second World War, when most Solomon Islanders were content to remain in their own provinces and live their subsistence existence, many Malaitan's were already moving to the Western and Guadalcanal provinces to seek employment in the major government and private sector economic developments on these two provinces.⁶ Malaitan families spread to different parts of the two provinces but especially Guadalcanal and settled. They intermarried and developed strong ties with their hosts resulting in land acquisition, some through traditional processes, some through cash transactions and others through deals which Guadalcanal landowners were not satisfied with such as the squatting on customary land (e.g. on the outskirts of Honiara). Dissatisfaction and tensions often occurred within the Guadalcanal/Malaita communities over these matters often resulting in violence and violence against women, bloodshed and deaths.

Long standing grievances of the Guadalcanal people included the former British colonials' and successive Solomon Island governments' acquisition of customary land for national development without proper consultation with landowners - especially since efforts by the Guadalcanal people to raise these issues with successive governments including the Guadalcanal Provincial Assembly fell on deaf ears.

Guadalcanal Militants' Uprising

The result of these resentments was the formation in April 1998 of an armed group of Guadalcanal youths later known as the Isatabu Freedom Movement or IFM intent on taking matters into their own hands and resolving these grievances themselves. Their ultimate

⁶ They worked as labourers on the coconut plantations and logging developments in both provinces, the palm oil and other agricultural development on the plains of Guadalcanal and much later, in the major tuna fishing industry in the Western Province and the gold mining operation on Guadalcanal.

retaliation was the forced eviction of approximately 20,000 Malaitans settlers from Guadalcanal around June 1999.

They also took out their anger on the major national developments on Guadalcanal such as the Solomon Islands Palm Oil and the Gold Ridge Mines, vandalising and destroying equipment, machinery and other assets. The staff of these developments, most of whom were Malaitans left for their safety and the companies closed.

Malaitan Military Retaliation

In early 2000, the Malaitans retaliated by forming the Malaita Eagle Force or MEF and many young men from Malaita, a good number from North Malaita eagerly enlisted as members. The MEF held Honiara under siege and many Guadalcanal townsfolk fled from Honiara to rural Guadalcanal. Others unfortunately were killed by the MEF which set up camps on the outskirts of Honiara, blockading any Guadalcanal persons from entering or leaving Honiara.

The Royal Solomon Islands Police, the majority of its members Malaitans, was compromised, leaving a trail of lawlessness and a loss of peace in Honiara.

Armed conflict occurred between the MEF and the IFM on the borders of Honiara and this period saw gross human rights violations including murder, rape, abductions, extra judicial killings, extortion, torture, restricted freedom of movement and freedom of expression and the displacement of many people. Children especially the girl child and young people were deprived of their rights especially their right to education and health.

2. Government's Peace Building Efforts

Various peace building efforts were implemented by the Solomon Islands government with assistance from the Commonwealth and the Australia and New Zealand Governments⁷ including the signing of the following agreements:

- *The Honiara Peace Accord*, 28 June 1999
- *The Panatina Agreement*, 12 August 1999
- *The Marau Communique*, 15 July 1999
- *Memorandum of Understanding between SIG and GPG*, 13 June 1999
- *Buala Peace Communique*, 5 May 2000
- *Auki Communique*, 12 May 2000
- *The Townsville Peace Agreement* 15 October 2000

These initiatives were aimed at getting the two militant groups to stop fighting and to lay down their guns but none of these peace building initiatives seemed to work and the conflict continued into its fifth year, 2003. The belief of many youth development workers and civil society in Solomon Islands was that the government's peace building initiatives were unsuccessful due to the exclusion of young people and women in the various peace talks. During the Townsville Peace Agreement talks although youth representatives of the two militant groups were present, they were only there to sign a peace agreement that had already been developed for them by a lawyer.

⁷A Commonwealth Secretariat mission was sent to Solomon Islands in mid June 1999, comprising a former Fiji Prime Minister and a senior Commonwealth Secretariat official who actively tried to broker and implement a

Another reason for the lack of success was that young people were usually “bolted onto” women’s peace building initiatives so their needs became secondary. Although both are vulnerable groups that may share common issues, the two groups have major differences in needs and perspectives and in the Pacific, women’s activists are more articulate in pushing their agenda than young people. For example during a Pacific regional consultation in Fiji in April 2005⁸ youths were placed on a ‘Women and Peace building panel’ and were able to share their stories as ex-combatants in civil conflicts. The panel outcomes saw key areas for national peace building as land, ethnicity, religion, gender, politics, etc. but nothing specific to youth.

Another reason for the failure of the peace building initiatives was that a good number of them were ‘foreign’ and did not take into account traditional and spiritual peacebuilding methods and practices that are used in Solomon Islands communities and which young people are familiar with. And although there were times when these traditional initiatives were used, there were instances when they were found to be insufficient due to the nature of the conflict situation and the need for newer knowledge and skills to address the conflict situation. In such situations the traditional peace brokers should be assisted with newer brokering knowledge and skills which they could blend with their traditional ones for sound and effective peace building programmes.

The compromised nature of the Solomon Islands Government in the conflict also contributed to its unsuccessful peace building efforts. To give an example, politicians from the two main provinces of the two warring factions were biased to their provincial sides and were also in possession of arms. Distrust among the young militants led to their uncooperative nature to surrender weapons and other arms further prolonging the conflict.

3. The Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI)

The intervention of the RAMSI in July 2003 was the most significant peace building initiative that happened in Solomon Islands in the sense that it ended the armed conflict between the MEF and the IFM. Coordinated by Australia and New Zealand in consultation with the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS) on behalf of the governments of the Pacific region, this intervention force comprises military personnel from the Pacific countries with the majority being from Australia, New Zealand, Fiji and Papua New Guinea in that order.

Many of the militants including North Malaitan young men were identified, arrested and charged by RAMSI officers. By October 2003 three hundred and forty (340) arrests were made with over 600 charges laid. Among those arrested were high profile MEF and IFM leaders and combatants. Over 300 firearms were recovered and 16 police posts were established around Solomon Islands. Nearly 30 villages along the road from Auki to Malu'u in North Malaita were declared “Gun Free” but anecdotal evidence has it that many Malaitan’s and North Malaitan ex combatants held on to their weapons.

Despite all this there are concerns about the RAMSI’s peace building strategies, a major one being the lack of involving locals in their decision making process. An Oxfam Report recommended that RAMSI emphasised the importance of consultation with communities

⁸ www.gppac.net/page. *Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict*

which in the Solomon Islands context includes men, women, youth and different ethnic and social groups. The report stated that in the absence of this, RAMSI's initiatives will reinforce rather than break down inequalities within society and within communities.⁹

4. Youth of North Malaita - during the conflict period and today

North Malaita is home to nearly 50%¹⁰ of young Malaitan male ex-combatants of the MEF. In fact the majority of the MEF leaders were from North Malaita. In a meeting¹¹ with more than 50 North Malaitan militants, held in August 2000 at Malu'u, the provincial substation of North Malaita, the militants voiced hatred, anger and revenge for the people of Guadalcanal.

What about the female youths of North Malaita? They too were badly affected by the conflict. Personal accounts from North Malaita told of the vulnerability of displaced women and girls to abuses including physical beatings and rape during the conflict years¹². According to an Amnesty International Report, gender-based violence against women and girls was an entrenched feature in the five-year armed conflict in Solomon Islands. The perpetrators were members of the police, the MEF, the IFM and individual males taking advantage of the lawless situation created by the conflict. The report continued to state that the number of women who were physically and sexually abused during the Solomon Islands conflict is not known. Counselling for the young people of North Malaita is limited.

Four years after the RAMSI intervention in Solomon Islands, North Malaitan young men are again in the limelight. At the end of November 2007, the young men of North Malaita were implicated in violent clashes with Tongan soldiers serving under RAMSI based in North Malaita;¹³ and ordinary villagers of North Malaita are now complaining about an increase in crime in the area after a lull on the arrival of RAMSI in the country. They are seeing increases in the use of marijuana and homemade alcohol, 'kwaso' among the young people. They are seeing a new culture of activities that lead to violence and conflict which is being introduced by returned North Malaita youths from Guadalcanal. This culture is creating problems for North Malaita women and girls who are complaining of continuous incidences of sexual harassment, rape and other sexual abuses.

So why, even with the arrival of RAMSI and four years on after the conflict are the male youths of North Malaita still violent and the female youths still suffering violent sexual abuses? This question is what the Uttermost Rural Development Foundation (URDF) the youth rural based organisation of North Malaita is trying to address by developing a peace building programme for the young people of North Malaita. North Malaita young people have not had much opportunity to access any help to address their conflict disturbed mental and emotional state. Neither have they been provided with any opportunity to be involved in meaningful engagements for their physical recuperation and to deter them from repeating the violence that they had got accustomed during the conflict period. Attempts by the

⁹ Oxfam, *Beyond Operation Helpem Fren*, 25 August, 2003

¹⁰ There has been no official figure of the numbers of young men involved in the two militant groups of the Solomon Islands conflict.

¹¹ The meeting was part of a scoping mission to the Solomon Islands by the Save the Children Australia to find out the situation of the areas mostly affected by the conflict

¹² Author's baseline study on the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands for the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat

¹³ To'abaita Authority for Research and Development (TARD) North Malaita Villagers allege attack by RAMSI soldiers, November 29, 2007, Suva, Fiji

government to assist young people did not seem to work because the plans and implementers were in Honiara while the young people were in the rural areas. There was a failure to blend contemporary peace building knowledge and skills with traditional and spiritual peace building skills and knowledge that exists in country with our local leaders.

A way forward? The Uttermost Rural Development Foundation (URDF)

The Uttermost Rural Development Foundation or the URDF was established by a young North Malaita man, Mr. Redly Ramo in 2004. Redley had left Honiara and his well earning job in 2004 to return to the basics of rural life in his home village of Fulifo'oe. His vision was to help the youth of his rural area of North Malaita, specifically the young men affected by the atrocities they had committed during the conflict and the young women who had suffered sexual and other abuse.

Not one for just talking, Redley began initiating two major projects for URDF members after its establishment. The first was the Gwaunakwaru Cocoa Nursery. Working with agriculture authorities he managed to secure cocoa seedlings and planted these in a nursery. The idea was to provide 100,000 cocoa plants free, each year to young North Malaitan farmers to contribute to Solomon Islands national cocoa production. Redley was proud to tell CYP that North Malaita has been reported to be contributors of about 10% of the country's national cocoa production.¹⁴

He next embarked on another URDF project which was a savings club and a micro-finance scheme the aim of which is to provide an opportunity for members to save the money they had earned from their cocoa sales. Another of this project's aims was to create a central fund for its members from which they could obtain loans for any projects they may want to embark on. Still in the planning stages, Redley and the members of the URDF were looking forward to linking this project to a proposed rural ANZ mobile bank service, in the North Malaita area. They saw this as an opportunity to enhance their efforts to bank their hard earned savings and also to begin introducing young people of North Malaita to get into the culture of saving.

A Rethink

Although the URDF's efforts for the young people were genuine and sound and had produced results, the violence continued. It dawned on Redley that a major gap existed between the URDF, its members, their projects and the rest of their communities. So he gathered his members, the young people, males and females as well as traditional leaders, women leaders and church leaders for discussion. Someone likened the URDF to the following North Malaita saying,

“Biu wane tha forofaka.”

This saying refers to individuals or groups who operate in isolation from the rest of the community so never succeed in any of their endeavours.

¹⁴ http://www.ausaid.gov.au/publications/pdf/solomon_study_vol4.pdf p 90

The URDF Programme Coordinator, Mr. Ben Lesibana responded that “We aim to stretch our hands out to capture different tribes and families because the first problem we must fix is that of broken relations”. There was a realisation that to provide sustainable livelihood opportunities for young people was unrealistic without prior attention to the mental and emotional wellbeing of the young people.

The URDF Peace Building Programme

The first phase of the programme is focused on emotional and mental well being through counselling and reconciliation ceremonies for conflicting parties. The second Phase is the attempt to maintain peace by engaging the North Malaita young people in sustainable livelihood programmes.

The first phase of the peace building programme of the URDF is depicted in a four tiered triangle in Appendix 1.

Level 1: Peace Building Team

It should be noted that level one is right at the base of the triangle meaning that the URDF will be adopting a ‘bottom up’ approach. As such the young people were themselves going through a very stressful experience caught between trying to do good, (by engaging in the projects) however in a frame of mind that was still very much entrenched in violence and so constantly being derailed to do bad when the violence in them was triggered. URDF Lesibana had the following to say:

“The foundation from which to start the peace process is to have a sound understanding of the problems and to be able to identify those that are involved in the problems including the perpetrators as well as those that are negatively affected by the problem. At this level of the peace process, we have to identify the main actors who are needed to participate in the peace building process.”

The major actors were identified as: young people; traditional leaders; church/religious leaders and women leaders.

One of the initial tasks for the peace building team is to address the wellbeing of the team members themselves, mentally and physically to ensure that they are in an acceptable level of their frame of mind before they are able to carry out the major peace building tasks and responsibilities required of them. The team will gather and discuss a programme to address the different team member’s needs. Women and youth may need to become more confident, assertive, diplomatic and better able to listen and negotiate. Basic counselling training is essential for the Peace Building Team. CYP can play a role here by linking the URDF to Pacific organisations and groups such as ones in Bougainville on trauma counselling methods¹⁵ and restorative justice. On training, the URDF’s founder has the following to say,

“The manner of conflicts these days are more complicated due maybe to the nature of the conflict itself and the increase in knowledge and power among conflicting individuals. This

¹⁵ Howley, P, 2000. ‘Restorative justice in Bougainville’, Development Bulletin, no. 53, pp. 23-25.

makes the conflict situation more complicated for traditional leaders or Church leaders to handle. Sometimes situations arise when the traditional and church leaders' positions may be compromised. This results in the lack of respect for these community leaders by the young people and the other people whose disagreements we are trying to solve... It is therefore important that we conduct an initial screening kind of exercise during which we will gauge their skills and knowledge... We appreciate that there must be gender balance and including women in all our discussions and decision making is important because women are the ones comfortable to talk to other women and our culture generally expects that."

Level 2: Issues Identification (Mapping Exercise)

A significant component of this level is the mapping exercise to be conducted by the Peace Building Team in the communities of North Malaita to identify the conflicting parties, their communities and the nature of their disagreement. Local modes of information gathering will be used as traditionally there are dos and don'ts of getting information from people. For example, the sight of young people taking the lead in collecting information may be viewed as great disrespect to conflicting parties and a dilution of the importance of the conflict situation. Hence, church leaders and chiefs need to be at the forefront when making initial contact to explain the aim of the exercise, before young people can collect information. The CYP cannot bulldoze unfamiliar beliefs and concepts onto a rural community; it must always be borne in mind that these situations are still raw and any cultural insensitivity may kill the whole exercise right at the beginning.

By the end of the Mapping Exercise, conflicting parties will be identified, in what communities they are located, the nature of the conflict and so forth. Once this data is collected it is ready for compilation and analysis, again with young people at the forefront. Once the data is compiled and analysed with recommendations on how to proceed from Level 2 to Level 3 the actors will make use of their sound knowledge of their communities to search for 'helpers' in the respective areas to assist the individual team members to visit the sites and begin talking to the disagreeing parties. The helpers' local knowledge will assist the team to develop appropriate methodologies and approaches, which may vary from case to case.

Level 3: Peace Building (Mediating between Conflicting Parties)

The majority of the North Malaitan ex-combatants had already been dealt with by the law when RAMSI arrived in Solomon Islands, and are serving their term in the prisons of Honiara or Auki, the capital of Malaita Province. Others have been released from their prison terms and are loafing around in the communities causing problems. It is these people that the Peace Building Programme is targeting as well as the young women who have experienced the trauma of sexual abuse during and after the conflict.

URDF's Lesibana states,

"When they go out to do the peace building part, they will go to the identified disagreeing parties. They know their environment, their target group and they will apply the knowledge and skills that they have learnt according to how they best see the situation. We must be flexible so the length of time to spend on a case depends on how the case is approached and according to the nature of the case itself."

It is expected that peaceful outcomes will result from the dialogues conducted by the team with the various individual conflict cases in the areas and communities that they had addressed and reconciliation between the conflicting parties will be the end result. Reports of these will be returned to the URDF's secretariat and preparation for a mass reconciliation ceremony will be made.

Level 4: Reconciliation

At this level, plans will be made by the URDF for mass reconciliation ceremonies to be held according to traditional and biblical/spiritual methods of reconciliations depending very much on the background of the reconciled parties and the nature of the solved conflict. In some cases there may be a merger of the two. Furthermore there may be parties who may want to be compensated whether monetarily or through other items of value and others, who may be strong holders of the Christian faith who may just want a church reconciliation ceremony to end the conflict. Monetary contributions will not be huge as in instances as this the Pidgin English term "eniting nomoa iu givim kam" (whatever you offer will be accepted) applies.

Traditional ceremonies include the offering of pigs, shell money, food and other items of customary value to the oppressed group by the perpetrating party. Feasting, custom dancing, singing and the merry making will follow with a solemn ceremony of hand shaking to confirm that the feud is forgotten and everyone is friends again and peace is restored among the conflicting tribes, families or individuals.

With the biblical ceremonies, no offering of valued goods is made but a prayer service will be held which will be attended by whole communities, during which a sermon will be preached focusing on forgiveness as preached by the Jesus in the Bible. This will be followed by members of the conflicting parties going to the front of the church and praying together for the forgiveness and the cleansing of their sins. This forgiving ritual will be accompanied by lots of singing, dancing and crying to symbolise true repentance for the wrongs that they had committed. A feast will follow to seal the reconciliation ceremony during which testimonies from both sides will be made and further praying, singing and crying will also take place. This seals the reconciliation ceremony by the two parties.

According to Redley the URDF will assist by making monetary contributions for costs related to the reconciliation ceremonies. Reconciled parties will also be asked to make some contributions to show they are committed to the reconciliation. This could be by cash or by kind the major ones being the donation of pigs and food or the availing of their women folk to prepare the feast.

Phase 2.

The Peace Building Programme will continue in North Malaita with continued counselling for young people and further reconciliation interventions and ceremonies. But Redley also had the following to say,

“Peace is a big thing. You can talk peace but we need to put food on the table. Our vision is that all youths put their hands on the plough and work and peace is the platform from which to work. Peace must also be in terms of livelihood especially economic livelihood, cultural aspects and sports. These are the components of the whole peace process.”

Redley acknowledged that there will be threats, but that he said is a human problem. The URDF will need to bring in other programmes to engage the young people who have undergone the Peace Building Process. Redley cited the following programme areas as those that the URDF is aiming to offer for its members as the next phase of the Peace Building Programme:

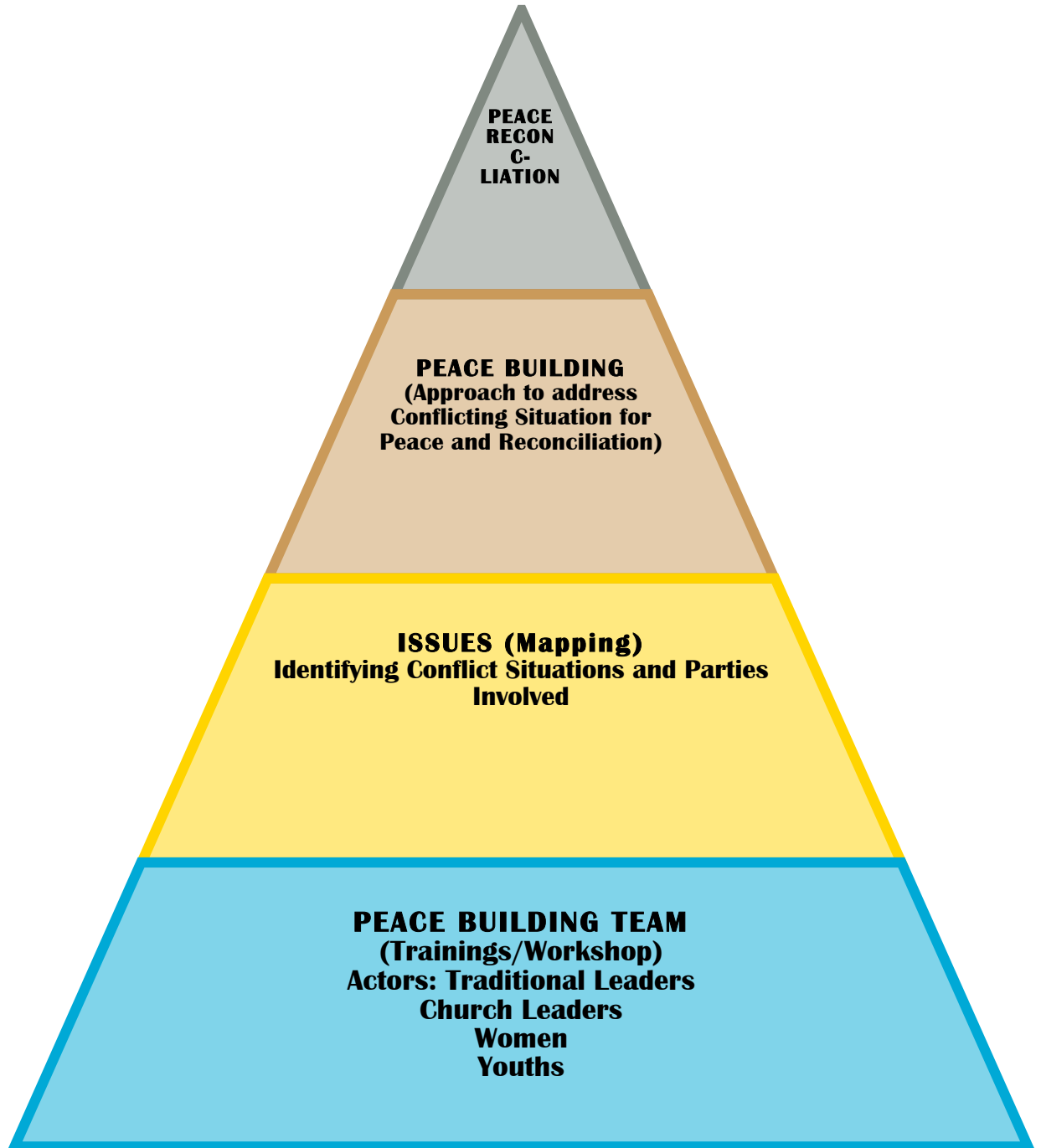
- Livelihood
- Cultural
- Sports
- “Everything and anything”

The CYP has held meetings with the Manukau City Youth Business Entrepreneurship (Pacific Island Business Trust) and the Youth Trade Expo Coordinator who also lectures in an Auckland technical institute; on the possibility of them conducting training for the members of the URDF in livelihood areas that the members themselves will identify. The plan is that a scoping mission will be conducted by the Youth Trade Expo Coordinator to North Malaita with staff of the CYP during the second phase. This will also be an opportunity to manage expectations.

Conclusion

The conflicts in the Pacific have been the result of government decisions that failed to take into account critical factors such as accountability and transparency, youth participation in decision-making, gender and the human rights approach as a whole. As the examples in this story show, young people are one of the most affected groups of people when conflict situations occur. Pacific governments are urged to create programmes for conflict-affected and rural young men and young women just like Mr Ramo and the URDF are doing for the young people of North Malaita.

PEACE PROCESS



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