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**USING THE NATIONAL YOUTH STRATEGY FOR COORDINATION OF
YOUTH WORK IN TONGA**

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1. Purpose

This paper has been written to demonstrate the need for strategic coordination of initiatives of youth stakeholders in Tonga. The need for strategic coordination was significant in driving forward the Tonga National Youth Strategy 2007–2012. Inherent in the strategy is the need for partnership and collaboration in the implementation of programmes and activities in the youth sector.

2. Introduction

Before 2006, the Ministry of Education was the caretaking agency for youth affairs. In the mid-1980s, the Ministry set up the Tonga National Youth Congress as the umbrella organisation for youth groups across Tonga. There was no specific mandate and no long-term plans for the strategic management of youth affairs and youth development. In this regard, in the absence of a Ministry to be in charge of youth affairs and youth development, youth groups remained scattered and the activities of stakeholders were ad hoc and scattered across the spectrum of NGOs and government agencies.

In 2004, SPC, in the absence of a proper Ministry, began working with the Tonga National Youth Congress on drawing up a policy framework that would guide the work of the Congress and other stakeholders. The framework, in the form of a ‘Youth Policy’, was completed in 2005.

The Ministry of Training, Employment, Youth and Sports was established in mid-2006 and became operational in January 2007. It was given the mandate for youth affairs and development. Officially, this means that the government is now expecting a better focus on youth. The biggest task for the Ministry was to review and streamline the Youth Policy document, get it approved, and bring together the stakeholders to implement what eventually became the Tonga National Youth Strategy. The strategy was approved in 2007 and the Ministry sees it as a golden opportunity to coordinate the activities of stakeholders.

3. Current situation

The implementation of the Tonga National Youth Strategy, which covers five broad components (skill development, employment creation, community service, health education, and advocacy and leadership), is going to be a challenge for the Ministry. The areas covered by the strategy cut across a whole range of areas that are outside the mandate of the Ministry. Hence, there is a need for effective coordination of stakeholders in order to put in place programmes of activities to implement the strategy effectively.

Skill development requires collaboration with training providers, although the Ministry is already running formal trades training under its technical institutes. Some of the stakeholders are responsible for running their own informal training but there is no benchmarking of their quality. The problem is to make sure that the training providers are maintaining the required quality and that they are able to deliver the courses required.

Employment creation requires concerted efforts by the Ministry and productive sectors, especially agriculture, fisheries and tourism, and the micro-business sector. This means that employment creation should feature in the corporate sector plans of government agencies. In this regard, the Ministry is required to liaise with them on the need to collaborate on employment creation. The work of NGOs to create employment is not coordinated by the Ministry and most projects run by NGOs are small in scale and do not cover the youth population widely.

Community service is the most widely covered area, with various youth groups participating in all forms of community activities, especially those related to the environment, culture and life skills. They tend to be village-focused with no general direction or coordination at the national level. Likewise, health education is delivered by a number of NGOs without any coordination of activities. They tend to concentrate their training on their members and operate in urban centres because their resources do not permit them to do more.

Leadership training and advocacy is a new concept and has only become part of youth development recently. Much of the training is sponsored by aid organisations. It is delivered through various means, including workshops, seminars and classroom learning.

4. Lessons learned

When the new Ministry came into being, it saw that there was a need for a focal point for action. The Ministry saw the National Youth Strategy as the only means of persuading stakeholders to make concerted efforts; it was pointless to call meetings of stakeholders without any concrete basis for action. The Ministry spent the first quarter of 2007 drawing up an action plan to implement the strategy. The next step was to call for a youth stakeholders meeting to discuss the strategy and action plan. While the stakeholders received the strategy with some suspicions, they agreed in November 2007 to form a Youth Stakeholders Forum to further discuss the two documents. The lesson here is that better coordination could be achieved through an instrument like the strategy. It is a more rational approach to bringing together stakeholders because they see in the strategy opportunities to further their activities and interests. At the national level, this is beneficial for the Ministry as it allows it to obtain an overview of youth development activities and use the strategy to guide the stakeholders.

The stakeholders are typically small organisations that represent minority groups across the whole spectrum of youth. The Ministry needed a strong partner/stakeholder to deal with the majority of

youth. The church had to become a partner because traditionally young people belong to the church, and as church affiliation in Tonga is strong, it became clear that the Ministry had to work with the church-based youth organisations in order to cover the youth population as widely as possible and to assist in integration of resources. The important lesson here is that if you want effective coordination, you need a strong partner that can assist the Ministry in effectively implementing a strategy.

5. Conclusion

In order to strengthen coordination, the Ministry supported the setting up of a Youth Stakeholders Forum as the avenue for discussion of programmes of activities. The National Youth Strategy has become the focal point for action and has helped to bring the stakeholders together for a common purpose. Both the forum and the strategy provide strong avenues for collaboration and partnership among the stakeholders in youth work and youth development. A strong partner such as the church will assist in the delivery of an effective service through the strategy to a majority of young people.
