

## Re-thinking the youth bulge theory in Melanesia

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### Abstract

In this article, I critique the youth bulge theory. The youth bulge theory is derived from strategic demography and it seeks to explain how demographic factors influence global and regional security. In recent discussions on development in the Pacific Islands, commentators argue that Melanesia is contending with growing and increasingly violence-prone generations of male youth. I argue, however, that the youth bulge theory as applied to Melanesian societies disregards the complex social and cultural dynamics of the context it purports to describe. In Papua New Guinea and Melanesia, alternative dimensions of re-thinking the demographic challenges of the youth bulge exist. When Melanesian-oriented scholarship weighs into the debate, it provides empowering alternatives to understanding the demographic phenomenon of the youth bulge.

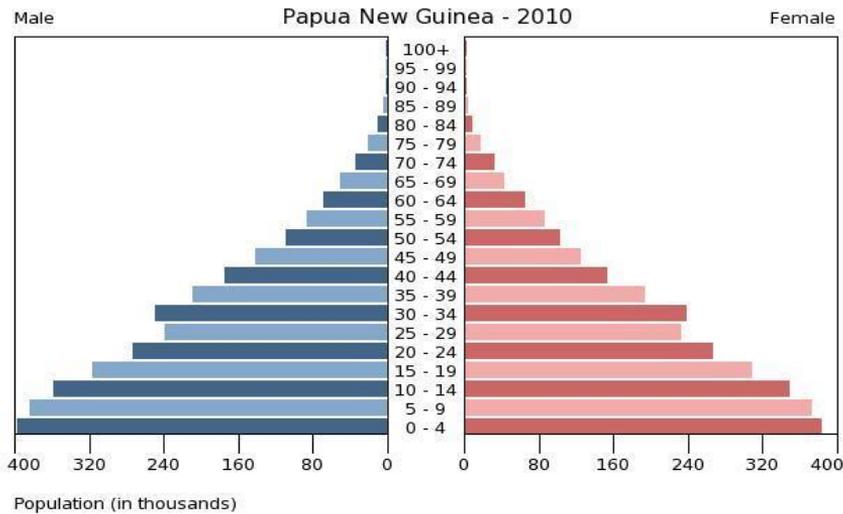
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### Introduction

Countries in the Melanesian sub-region of the Pacific Islands are experiencing significant changes in the structures of their demography. One characteristic of these demographic changes is the increasing number of young peoples in the general population (Table 1 & Figure 1). Demographers refer to this phenomenon as the “youth bulge”. For proponents of the youth bulge theory, “youth” are defined as the category of peoples within a given population between 15 and 29 years of age (see for instance, Daumerie, 2008; Urdal, 2004).

**Table 1: Median age range of selected Melanesian countries according to the International Labor Organization (2000)**

	Total population 2000, millions	Median age years	Youth pop (15-24) 2000, millions	Percent of total population
<i>Melanesia</i>				
<i>Fiji</i>	0.8	23.7	0.2	21.30%
<i>PNG</i>	4.8	20.5	0.9	19.70%
<i>Solomon Islands</i>	0.4	18.2	0.1	20.50%



**Figure 1: Papua New Guinea population pyramid from the US Census Bureau (2010)**

Within the field of strategic demography, a key assumption of the youth bulge theory is the “power in numbers” fear, where large numbers of young people concentrated in specific locales are perceived as potential serious security threats (Hendrixson, 2003c:2; Kaplan, 1994:46). According to Anne Hendrixson (2003c), “young men... [are a]...historically volatile population” (p.29). Moreover, “the presence of more than twenty percent of young people in the population signals the possibility of political rebellion and unrest particularly in the global South where analysts argue that governments may not have the capacity to support them (Hendrixson, 2003a:29). Youth bulge theories argue that a country with weak governance and lack of social or economic opportunities for its youthful population will inevitably experience civil unrest and political strife, as young people increasingly become assertive.

How the demographic challenges unfold in Melanesia is predicated on what is happening globally (PiPP, 2011b). Whilst it is informative to acknowledge global developments for comparative lessons, its application in explaining crisis situations, particularly in Melanesian countries, does not necessarily mean its key assumptions are universal. Anne Hendrixson (2004) noted that “[M]ost writing and analysis on “youth bulge” theory simply assumes that it is “common sense” without critically exploring its foundations or testing whether it is credible in various cultural or historical contexts” (p.4).

The objective of this paper is to highlight the mitigating factors that prevent the youth bulge theory’s fatalistic assumptions. Any discussion on regional security can be averted through empowering ways of interpreting the demographic changes in Melanesian societies. Using the case study of Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands and a review of the literature in the

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scholarship, some of the core assumptions of the youth bulge discourse will be counteracted.

This paper is complemented by quotations from interviews conducted with young Papua New Guineans. For the most part, the research is informed by findings generated during postgraduate research, where ethnographic sketches of young Papua New Guineans were examined. From how young Papua New Guineans speak, theirs in a complex world-view – filled with frustrations, but more importantly – possibilities.

It is not the intention of this paper to romanticise situations in PNG or Melanesian countries. True, Melanesian states are faced with the harsh realities of meeting the ever-increasing demands of their citizens. But there are also positive changes that preoccupy the young people in Melanesian states. Melanesian countries, by virtue of their own internal complexities and historical developments have nuances that are radically different from other regions of the world where the preoccupation with the youth bulge are more apparent.

### **The youth bulge – a Melanesian problem?**

The prevalence of the youth bulge discourse in Melanesia is not coincidental. In their problematizing of Melanesian countries, commentators advance the notion that these countries will, because of the demographic bulge, inevitably confront issues of instability and crisis. Combined with weak governance and a lack of socio-economic advancement, the mere presence of so many young people will only exacerbate internal insecurity in Melanesian countries (Ware 2005; AusAID 2006; Booth et al. 2006; Dobell 2006). Population growth, resource limitations and weak political institutions received serious traction in regional policy thinking in the early 1990s (Callick, 1993).<sup>1</sup>

Declining developmental trends in post-Independence Pacific Islands serve as a backdrop to understanding the tenuous relationships between demographic factors and economic vulnerabilities and the breakdown of social order. One of the key indicators which youth bulge theory employs is youth unemployment. Job markets in the formal sectors of the economy are perceived as inadequate in absorbing the increasing numbers of youth coming out of the education system (see Callick 1993; Gannicott 1993). Pacific Island leaders, through the Eminent Person's Groups (EPG), somewhat belatedly recognized "the needs and aspirations of the burgeoning population of young people in the region, and recognize the impact of bigger and more youthful populations on the resources required for education and vocational training, healthcare, and job opportunities" (Chan, et al. 2004:13).

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<sup>1</sup> Commentators such as Helen Ware (2004) and Graeme Dobbel (2006) argue that the socio-economic indicators of countries in the Pacific Islands region are inadequate in meeting the expectations of this increasing section of the community.

When the expectations of young people are not met, frustrations build, leading to mobilization or recruitment into armed movements. In the aftermath of the “ethnic tensions” in the Solomon Islands,<sup>2</sup> the youth bulge theory has found a growing number of sympathetic proponents committed to interpreting conflict and crisis situations in Melanesia. The youth bulge theory is readily deployed as a useful framework in their discussions (Ware, 2005; Dobell, 2006).

The youth bulge theory effortlessly finds fertile ground in Melanesia for another much more insidious reason. Melanesia is a sub-region that has been associated with conflict and crisis situations. One scholar argues that “internal conflict and violence” are prevalent “in the Melanesian sub-region of Oceania”....while... “microstates of Polynesia and Micronesia have, when compared with Melanesia, been relatively conflict free” (Henderson, 2005: 12). Likewise, Ben Reilly (2002) concludes that Melanesian governance and living standard indicators are clearly preconditions for the crises and breakdown of the state institutions.

The imagery of a deeply problematic Melanesia was featured front and center in the Australian foreign policy-making fraternity after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States. Discussions expanded to include the “arc of instability”,<sup>3</sup> geographically inclusive of almost all the Melanesian countries.<sup>4</sup> Around the same time the “arc of instability” discourse gained prominence, commentators began applying the failed state (or potential failed state) label on several Melanesian countries (Hughes, 2004; Wainwright, 2003; Roughan, 2002). Neil Plimmer (2007) also asserts that “the seriousness of the ‘youth bulge’ in many Pacific Islands Countries (PICs) is a factor behind unemployment and social unrest” (Plimmer, 2007:10). Moreover, Plimmer concludes that the youth bulge “is and will be more marked in the Melanesian states than elsewhere in the Pacific” (ibid.).

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<sup>2</sup>The conflict in the Solomon Islands, euphemistically referred to as the “ethnic tensions” began in the late 1990s when disgruntled Guadalcanal militants started agitating for the expulsion of Malaitan settlers on their lands in and around the urban capital of Honiara. In 1998, actual confrontations resulted in the formation of a Guadalcanal-based Guadalcanal Revolutionary Army (GRA, later changed to Isatabu Freedom Movement - IFM). The Malaitan Eagle Force (MEF) with membership from the Malaitans was formed in response to intimidation on Malaitan settlers on Guadalcanal.

<sup>3</sup>The “arc of instability”, used in the context of Australian security and strategic discussions depicts the region north of Australia, stretching from Timor Leste, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Fiji. These states are seen as internally unstable and prone to civil strife and political uncertainty. However Graham Dobell (2007) argues that even though the “arc” “is a useful term in Canberra, summing up a range of diplomatic, economic and geopolitical forces. The arc of instability is descriptive rather than explanatory; it doesn’t seem to have much utility when you are standing in one of the individual states it encompasses” (p.3).

<sup>4</sup>In the context of the Pacific, ‘arc of instability’ was first used in 2000 in the aftermath of the Fiji coup. Kevin Rudd, the new prime minister of Australia in 2007 in announcing a “new approach” by Australia towards the southwest Pacific includes Timor, PNG, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji, Tonga, and Nauru in his ‘arc of instability’ (Rudd, 2007). Ironically, the old terminologies remain even though the approach is new. A criticism of this worst case scenario thinking is that it exaggerates the scale of the approach that is developed outside the Pacific Island countries.

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It is therefore not surprising that any problematic discourse such as the youth bulge theory is readily appropriated into Melanesia. And for Melanesians, the youth bulge is a faceless, uncontrollable mass, predestined to be a source of instability.<sup>5</sup>

Fears of large numbers of urbanized, unemployed and restless youth being easily mobilized or induced into destabilizing factions have been central assumptions (see Sommers, 2003). Moreover, it is young people who “bear the burden of unemployment, a mismanaged economy, and an education system that provides them with few skills for self-employment” (Chevalier, 2001:39).

Undeniably, rapid social change is happening in Pacific Island societies. Confronting the changes, such as the dislocative processes of Westernization, urbanization and a consumerist culture, demands varying levels of responses (see for instance, Schoeffel, 1994). Recent incidences of conflict and unrest in Melanesia reinforce the perceived threat posed by broader social changes and an increasing number of youth. In an analysis of the 1998 ethnic crisis in the Solomon Islands, Judith Bennett (2002) observes:

There were few employment opportunities for young Solomon Islanders, especially those with little education, and opportunities further declined in the late 1990s.....This was a youthful population with higher aspirations than its parents. In the towns, it fed on images from the shabby video parlors that portrayed violence as a means to satisfy those aspirations (p.10).

Whilst unemployment is described as the cause of youthful agitation in Melanesian countries, commentators advocate the concept of regional labor mobility as a possible outlet in addressing this economic malady. Labor mobility is promoted as capable of relieving countries with the underemployment problem (Allegro, 2006:15; Dobell, 2007; Lynn, 2006; Maclellan and Mares, cited in Lynn 2006; Ware, 2005, 2004). This policy route emphasizing migration and labor mobility is of course consistent with global trends towards addressing the youth bulge concerns (UNDP, 2006:18; Urdal, 2004). The seasonal ‘fruit-picking’ contracts advocated in certain quarters of the policy communities of the two metropolitan countries, Australian and New Zealand is also seen in that light (Australian Government, 2006a, 2006b; Australian Senate, 2003).

Helen Ware (2007; 2005; 2004) has commented widely on the issue of the youth bulge. She observes that that “violent unrest in the Pacific Island Countries (PICs).....is increasingly common because of lack of employment for large cohorts of young people” (Ware, 2004a:1). Ware (2007) promotes emigration as a “partial solution” that would allow Pacific islanders and particularly Melanesians to enter into the metropolitan countries [New Zealand and Australia] on a short-term basis for lower-skilled seasonal work” (Ware, 2007: 242).

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<sup>5</sup>Commenting on the representation of youth, Hartmann and Hendrixson (2005) state that “the youth bulge is portrayed as an unpredictable, out-of-control force.....an immediate threat that must be stopped” (p.226).

Ware (2007) envisages that “the twin advantages of providing money for development and of reducing the pressures of youth unemployment at home” would be practical outcomes of the labor mobility arrangement (*ibid.*). Comparative interpretation of events in the region allowed her to make a case that because of overseas employment opportunities, Polynesians have managed to evade the instability instigated by its equally restless young population in Melanesia. Commenting on the Australian-led intervention in the Solomon Islands, Ware (2007) believes that

[I]n the longer term, the solution to this insecurity lies not in the military intervention of Regional Assistance Missions, or the external imposition of good governance programs, but in economic development that specifically gives young people a stake in their country rather than a motivation for unrest or permanent emigration (2007, p.221).

Kate Romer and Andre Renzaho (2007) also agree on employment as a solution to youth-led instances of instability. The re-emergence of “tensions” or “violence” in August 2006 was reflective of the fact that issues of youth unemployment have not been adequately addressed (see also Hassal & Associates, 2003). A notable feature in the 2006 Chinatown riot was the fact that young men were clearly sanctioned or urged on by political elites (Romer & Renhazo, 2007:6). Rioting was also experienced in Papua New Guinea in 2009, much of it fuelled by anti-Asian sentiments. In the aftermath of the anti-Asian riots, it was noted that “the ingredients of the riots were a build-up of frustrations, large numbers of unemployed, lack of job and business opportunities and difficulty in accessing credit funds” (Kolo, 2009).

Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands are prominently featured as examples of the consequences of the youth bulge (Brown, 2006). In Papua New Guinea, “disaffected youth are seen as a major cause of the deteriorating law and order situation in many villages and towns” (O’Collins, 2000). Sinclair Dinnen (1996) and Bill Standish (1994) have consistently cited socio-economic factors such as “urbanization [and the ensuing decline of traditional controls at village level], population growth, lack of economic growth and an expanding body of marginalized youth as providing important preconditions for crime and delinquency in Papua New Guinea” (Dinnen, 1996:92).

Rapid population growth (2.3 per cent per annum) and a very young population, with some 51 percent aged 19 years or below in 1980 are seen as presenting major challenges (Standish, 1994:56). Standish also mentions the lack of employment for young people who are drawn out of villages to towns for educational and job opportunities. Equally important to our understanding of youth behavior is the rapid decline of traditional social control mechanisms or authority, and the powerlessness of elders to enforce discipline, perhaps one of the “deepest cleavages” in controlling the behavior of young urban Papua New Guineans (see also O’Collins, 2000). In this context of socio-economic inequalities and rapid social change, physical violence and law and order problems are forms of rebellion and protest (O’Collins, 2000:56).

Growing levels of resentment on the part of an increasingly young population base, where quality of governance is rated as abysmal (AusAID, 2006), has significant implications for state legitimacy. Youth are frequently the most politically active and potentially volatile population (O'Collins, 1986, especially Chapter 10). Against the on-going challenges of political corruption in Papua New Guinea, "there might be a rise in public disorder including violence, when there is widespread recognition amongst Papua New Guineans, especially the youth, that corruption permeates through the Government bureaucracy" (Joku, 2007:1).

The narrative generally portrays youth as a homogenous entity devoid of agency. But where the youth bulge discourse generally depicts young people as impulsively violent and conflict-prone, it disregards youth-led initiatives that are worth knowing and supporting. In the absence of any "recognition and positive interaction, discussions about the current youth generation" (Sommers, 2003:6), it will continue to "strip it [youth] of self-respect, underestimate its potential, and leave it devalued" (Hendrixson, 2003b:5).

Not only is this perpetuating a "gross exaggeration and a distortion of reality" (Boyden, 2006:3), it also disregards the capacity of youth to mobilize in pursuit of non-violent objectives. Youth in Melanesian communities are increasingly undertaking community initiatives and advocacy work. Far from being the violent revolutionary overthrow of the existing status quo,<sup>6</sup> there are indeed subtle ways of youth participation in the respective communities. In the next section of this paper, the mitigating factors against the youth bulge theory in Melanesia are highlighted.

### **Alternative futures – Where is the youth bulge heading?**

The assumptions of the youth bulge theory do not demonstrate in any convincing manner the critical question of whether youth are the actual source or symptoms of large-scale violence and instability. Its application in Melanesia is at best inconsistent as a predictive science of human behavior.<sup>7</sup> And when there is an emphasis on comparisons with other regions of the world<sup>8</sup>, the scale of sustained youth-initiated conflict is exaggerated.

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<sup>6</sup>Angela Gregory's stark warning of Pacific Island revolutions, triggered by disenchanted young Pacific Islanders is one of the most recent commentaries. See Gregory, Angela (2006), "Revolution warning for Pacific as 'youth bulge' keeps growing", available online at [http://www.nzherald.co.nz/world/news/article.cfm?c\\_id=2&objectid=10389228](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/world/news/article.cfm?c_id=2&objectid=10389228), accessed: October 11, 2010

<sup>7</sup> Predictive analysis is a method that applies demographic data against variables such as economic growth to show probabilities of conflict situations. Predictive analysis is used globally to carry out such 'cross-national studies' to situate the probabilities of conflict, violence and crisis (see for example Urdal, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> For instance, in an article entitled "Youthquake: will Melanesian democracy be sunk by demography?" the Pacific Institute of Public Policy (2012) boldly states: "one area where there is similarity between the Middle East and Melanesia is demographics. Both have large, youthful populations that are tired of the status quo and leaders who have failed to manage change, including generational change of political leadership." (p. 3).

For instance, in the Solomon Islands, the involvement of young men can best be described as reactionary and opportunistic. Jon Fraenkel (2004) notes how “underemployed youths from Guadalcanal and Malaita...were initiated by ex-national politicians who found in them convenient new weapons to deploy their challenges to the government of the day” (p.186). The point to be made here is that Melanesian youth, as with the example of the Solomon Islands, lack cohesiveness as an ideological group in society.

Conflict or armed revolt on a national scale needs the ability of young people mobilizing around national agendas – something that is lacking in most parochially-oriented communities of PNG. Therefore the potential for young people to form long-term coalitions, and the sustenance of broad-based armed revolutionary movements is found wanting in PNG. Exaggerations of any collective national grievance towards the status quo are misplaced when considerations are given to identity politics in Melanesian societies.

In multi-ethnic societies like PNG, violence and instability may invariably be futile. The futility of large-scale rebellion in distinctively diverse close-knit societies is a mitigating factor not accounted for in the youth bulge narrative. Polly Wiessner’s (2010) study of Engan tribal warfare is illuminating. Wiessner demonstrates that where elders are influential in the lives of young men, the disowning of violence and tribal warfare by young men is possible. Wiessner further observes:

In some clans elder men spend time with young men....aligning the goals of the two generations as was done in men’s houses and during bachelors’ cults. The efforts of tribal leaders fall on fertile soil. The population of Enga is weary of futile modern war and the destruction it brings. Many in the upcoming generation have spent miserable years as refugees and want the benefits of the modern world, not war (Wiessner, 2010:15-16).

As was also illustrated in the Solomon Islands, if youth-initiated conflicts are apparent, such acts may not always appeal beyond the intertwined layers of social and cultural identities. Morgan Brigg (2009) argues that “several decades of marriage across tribal and island groups in modern Solomon Islands” has generated “a dense countrywide web of relationships” (p. 156). Brigg even suggests that in the conflict of 1998-2003, people “escaped or mitigated violence through the cross-cutting ties among militants and civilians” (p. 152). The extended relationships cultivated through marriage, migration and other social interactions in the Solomon Islands are mitigating factors against youth-initiated mayhem in these societies. In the context of conflict prevention, Ganjiki, an informant in this study, highlights a positive aspect of PNG’s multi-ethnic make-up:

“We don’t have a big group of Papua New Guineans who can really lead, you know, like you see in countries like Rwanda, when they were divided into two – Hutus and Tutsis....So you don’t have one group rising up and expecting a whole bunch of people to follow that group. You will have one group of people from one province rising up but you will have one group from the other

province or region will say: *Yupela husait na mipela bihainim yupela?* [Who are you that “we” should follow “you”?]

Far from being a problematic, the multi-ethnic nature of Papua New Guinea lends itself into a mitigating factor in terms of its nation-building efforts and the containment of internal strife associated with communal violence.

Community advocacy groups are taking to social media in their connecting-up with other Papua New Guineans both inside and outside of the country. The membership of Facebook, Twitter and other social media platforms on the internet is testament to this development. Clay Shirky (2011) notes that “As the communications landscape gets denser, more complex, and more participatory, the networked population is gaining greater access to information, more opportunities to engage in public speech, and an enhanced ability to undertake collective action” (p.29). Technology, and especially the information and communication technology is facilitating greater awareness and civic participation by youth.

Finally, accessibility to customary land and the use of the land in subsistence is a social safety net in Melanesian societies. Where the youth bulge theory assumes that youth unemployment in the formal economic sector will ultimately lead to grievances against the State, self-sufficient youth in typically agrarian societies such as Papua New Guinea offer a different perspective to such assumptions. The agrarian life-style of PNG as in other parts of Melanesia has been the basis of communal societies’ social security in times of uncertainty in the formal economic sector.<sup>9</sup> Economic-driven conflict situations are averted given the access to customary land by youth and where the informal economic sector is a source of material sustenance.<sup>10</sup>

Contrary to Susan Windybank and Mike Manning’s (2003) prognosis that the “safety net of subsistence farming and the local economy.....appears to be disintegrating”, the global economic uncertainties in latter part of the 2000s had minimal impact on PNG – a society characterized as having a “large proportion of the population living in rural areas, and depending almost entirely on subsistence agricultural, hunting, and fishing economies” (Mellam & Rao, n.d.). Daba, an informant from the Kainantu valley in the Eastern

<sup>9</sup> For instance, the global recession of 2009 revealed the fallacy of absolute faith on growth-oriented “solutions” to the problems of Melanesia. Ralph Regenvanu revealed how “Vanuatu’s 220,000 people had been largely unaffected by the global financial crisis – because they did not belong to the modern economy”. He cited statistics to show that 80 percent of ni-Vanuatu “lived in the traditional village economy, while even the rest – including his Port Vila constituents – rely on tradition and kinship for food, work exchanges and dispute settlement” (McDonald, 2009).

<sup>10</sup>The informal sector of the Papua New Guinean economy may play a role as well in the preoccupations of youth. Theodore Levantis (1997) explains that “Often, people are forced into informal earning activities through necessity due to difficulties in finding formal sector employment” (pp.73-4). In the absence of “government-provided social security system for the unemployed....Informal income-earning opportunities are thereby taken up as a ‘second-best’ option to formal employment” (p.74). Levantis (1997), in defining the notions of “employment” and “work” shows the vague interpretations of “unemployment” in societies where the informal sector caters for people engaging in productive, income-earning activities.

Highlands Provinces explains this when talking his future ambitions as a coffee-growing businessman:

I want to be an agriculturalist and tend to coffee crops and be a coffee grower. I have land. The land I possess was passed down through our one ancestor. He [originally] had the land and divided it up [amongst the family members] and we are custodians of this. It is a big piece of land. That is where I will plant my coffee. When I get the money [from the coffee]. I will start small. (Daba, per com. July 7, 2010)

Land in this instant is treated as a source of social security in sustaining the livelihood or material well-being of rural-based youth in Papua New Guinea. The desire to participate in the cash economy is also accommodated in this relationship to the land where cash cropping is the alternative source of income. This is established in a national social mapping report:

“.....in all provinces most people are still engaged in the subsistence economy and young people have access to clan land where they can grow food for direct consumption and a surplus to sell at local markets. Thus, in most communities unemployment does not mean that people do not have means to support themselves and unemployment is a problem mainly in urban centres where there is no land available and in certain areas in the nation where there has been a rapid increase in population, as for example in the Highlands Region, that has led to shortage of land resources” (National AIDS Council, 2005: 12).

Ownership and sharing of customary land has absorbed the destabilising situations in Melanesian communities. However, there are alarming trends emanating from land reforms currently implemented in Melanesian states. In PNG for instance, Colin Filer (2011) provides alarming details about the total amount of land that is now in the hands of national and foreign corporate entities.<sup>11</sup>

The dislocative effects of unregulated land reforms should be understood from a security lens with the fear that these mostly unscrupulous acts of land-grabbing are designated “for oil palm plantations....[where denying]...access to customary farming land damages rural food systems, as livelihoods are lost and access to alternate income opportunities...” (PiPP, 2011a:2).

Land, as a communal asset is a safeguard against potentially disastrous instances of instances in Melanesia communities. As such accessibility communal customary land should be factored into discussions about security and stability in the Melanesian sub-region.

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<sup>11</sup>According to Filer (2011), “Between the beginning of July 2003 and the end of January 2011, almost 5 million hectares of customary land (11 percent of PNG’s total land area) has passed into the hands of national and foreign corporate entities through a legal mechanism known as the ‘lease-leaseback scheme’” (p.2).

## Conclusion

The youth bulge theory as applied to Melanesian societies disregards the complex social and cultural dynamics of the context it purports to describe. For young people, their everyday lived experiences problematize and bring to light oversimplifications of youth bulge discourse. This paper argues that cross-cutting and extended networks among younger generations of Melanesians and Papua New Guineans are a positive source of strength and stability largely ignored by youth bulge theorists. The culturally valued creation of extended social relationships is a critical dimension of the demographic milieu that youth bulge theory should take into account.

Also large-scale urban youth disengagement in PNG and Melanesia is a consequence of corrosive cross-cutting global influences that contemporary PNG society is reproducing. But rather than subscribing to the gloomy predictions of a Melanesia that is increasingly susceptible to youth-initiated crises and revolutions, young Papua New Guineans are beholden to a range of positive socio-cultural linkages with which they identify. Context specificity and the inclusion of socio-cultural variables provide alternative ways of re-thinking the youth bulge theory in Papua New Guinea and Melanesia more generally. Youth bulge theory could become more empowering for policymakers if it were more attentive to the peoples and cultures it describes.

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