The Ambiguity of Identity: Youth’s Participation at the Solomon Islands Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Caitlin Mollica – Griffith University
c.mollica@griffith.edu.au
Draft publication: please do not cite.

In the world today, there are 1.2 billion individuals between the ages of 15-24 (UN Population Division 2015). That is, one out of six people globally is a member of the youth demographic. Despite this, transitional justice scholarship often falls short in its capacity to represent the true nature and magnitude of their post-conflict justice experiences. Specifically, despite several exceptions, research on youth in transitional contexts has been sporadic, piecemeal and concentrated on their status as non-political actors (Boyden 2008: ix; Lee-Koo 2015; 10-11). Accordingly, youth’s identity in these contexts is traditionally described in one of two ways, as vulnerable children, with limited agency, or as deviants and delinquents who threaten justice and successful transitions (McEvoy- Levy 2006; Brocklehurst 2006, 11). These two identity constructions are typically described as the victim/perpetrator binary.

While in recent years there has been a noticeable shift in the way youth participates in transitional justice, these binaries persist as the dominant frames employed for describing youth’s participation. As a result, the scholarship fails to reflect the true extent of their participation and interests. Indeed, this binary is unable to account for the unique and complex relationship between youth, justice and reconciliation. In practice, Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (TRC) have been instrumental in facilitating youth’s heightened engagement in transitional justice practices. Yet, largely absent from the empirical research on youth’s participation in transitional justice is the recognition that they inhabit specific roles in these reconciliation and justice practices distinct from children. Simply put, there is an ambiguity to youth’s identity that is not reflected in current depictions of the roles they play in post-conflict reconciliation and justice.
Youth’s participation at the Solomon Islands Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), however, reveals that they have the capability to shape transitional justice in diverse and innovative ways. As such, I suggest that youths' interactions with TRC processes in transitional contexts challenge the dominance of the victim/perpetrator identity. In particular, TRCs provide a forum for youth to demonstrate their capacity as political agents. Moreover, they facilitate a more open and inclusive justice process that allows young people to claim ownership over their conflict and reconciliation narratives.

Using interviews1 and transcripts from the TRC in the Solomon Islands I demonstrate that youth have the knowledge and capacity to contribute to transitional justice in ways that are forward-looking and development focused, while remaining mindful of the past. In doing so, this paper argues that identity exists on a spectrum, and thus the victim/perpetrator binary is no longer a sufficient framework for understanding youth’s relationship to justice and reconciliation. Moreover, I conclude that there is diversity to the identity of youth not reflected in the transitional justice scholarship or the ways in which key stakeholders continue to describe youth’s participation.

Before, examining youth’s participation at the Solomon Islands TRC, this paper will outline the empirical shift within the transitional justice field that acknowledged the importance of marginalised individuals. Following this, it will highlight the widely acknowledged ‘turn to truth’ that has resulted in the increased recognition of TRCs contributions to justice in transitional contexts. Next, this paper reviews the literature from the field that aims to assess the role of young people in the post-conflict environments. It will then outline the Solomon Islands contexts, and the importance of examining youth’s role in this transitional environment. Finally, using the case of the Solomon Islands TRC, this article will reveal the varied and fluid identities that youth

---

1 27 interviews were conducted in October and November of 2015. Interviews were conducted in English and the author completed all transcription. Interviewees included; staff members of the Solomon Islands Truth and Reconciliation Commission, current members of parliament, personnel from relevant ministries including the Ministry of National Unity, Peace and Reconciliation, and The Ministry for Women, Children and Youth, various key stakeholders from Non-Government Organisations, church groups and the local community. No monetary compensation was provided for interviews, however, drinks were provided. At the beginning of each interview, participants were informed of the voluntary nature of their involvement. They were also given information on the aims of the study, as well as what they would be asked.
occupy in transitional contexts. It will touch on the self-representations of youth throughout this process and the more dominant external constructions.

**Transitional Justice and the “turn to truth”**

As the transitional justice field has expanded beyond its retributive legal origins of the 1980s and 1990s, the practice has become increasingly concerned with ensuring active participation from a wide range of actors. Indeed, there is a growing belief that transitional justice processes that engage a large cross section of the community will be more meaningful and thus more effective (Chinkin 2003; Lederach 2005: 122; Lundy and McGovern 2008: 271, 277-283). As a result, transitional justice scholarship has taken a critical turn towards exploring the contributions of a wide range of individuals and social groups. Specifically, women, children and refugees, have become the subjects of much debate and attention in the scholarship and practice of transitional justice (Robins 2011; Bell and O’Rourke 2007; Haider 2014; Backer 2003; Parmar et al. 2010).

Reflecting this, in 2004 the Secretary General institutionalised this notion of diversity in his report *The Rule of Law and Transitional Justice* (UNSC 2004). The report listed “assessing national needs and capacities’ in transitional justice contexts as a critical imperative for the United Nations and the international community. Moreover, this report highlighted the importance of ‘assess[ing] a myriad of factors’ including ‘the situation and role of women’ and ‘the situation of children’ (UNSC 2004: 6). To this end, transitional justice now employs a broad range of mechanisms to ensure that those traditionally excluded can actively engage with justice and reconciliation processes in these contexts.

The most common amongst these practices are TRCs, which emerged as a viable alternative to trials in Africa and Latin America (Teitel 2003: 78; Hayner 2001: 14). TRCs are widely employed by transitional states in an attempt to pursue accountability for past human rights violations. They provide a ‘middle ground’ (also known as a third way) ‘that balances political constraints with justice demands’ (Olsen, Payne and Reiter 2010: 23; Chapman 2001: 258; Jeffery and Kim 2014: 14; Jeffery 2015: 36). TRCs therefore, fulfil a broad mandate which complements retributive forms of justice, and
delivers accountability, albeit in a different restorative form. Specifically advocates of TRCS, highlight their capacity to facilitate a community-centred approach to justice, which promotes healing and prevents conflict recurrence (Braham 2007; Ainley et. al 2015; Guthrey and Brounéus 2016). TRCs, as such, have the capacity to look beyond the traditional victim/perpetrator participatory models.

Today there is increased support for the idea that allowing victims to tell their stories is an important part of any society’s post-conflict recovery (Minow 1998: 61-87; Kiss 2000: 72; Hamber 2007:158). Proponents of the idea that ‘revealing is healing’ thus maintain that, this process provides healing to victims as it legitimates their accounts of the harm they experienced and creates an official record of events. That is, these mechanisms allow for the collection of stories regarding the conflict experiences of individuals. These stories are then collated to produce a holistic narrative of the conflict. Yet the notion that truth-telling is cathartic has not received consensus throughout the transitional justice field. In fact, several scholars in recent years have argued against the idea suggesting the TRC process can open old wounds and further traumatise victims (Stover 2005: 15; Allan and Allan 2000: 463; Mendeloff 2009: 592-593; Jeffery 2014: 96; Jeffery 2015: 47).

Nevertheless, the community-centred, narrative style of TRCs provides a wide range of individuals with a forum to actively engage with the justice process of transitional states. Advocates suggest that ‘truth telling can provide space for members of marginalized groups to perform publicly as citizens, perhaps for the first time in their lives’ (Fullard & Rousseau 2011: 57). That is, TRCs lend legitimacy to the conflict experiences of individuals and communities traditionally left on the fringes of transitional societies. Indeed, TRCs have been instrumental to the increased engagement of marginalised individuals with the justice process in transitional contexts, particularly women (Graybill 2001; Borer 2009; Dal Secco 2012), refugees (Young and Park 2009; Steinberg 2010; Haider 2014), children and youth.

In the case of youth, scholars suggest that the process of story telling post conflict is a positive experience as it both engages ‘and empowers youth’ (Senehi and Byrne 2006: 238). That is, by engaging youth in the TRC process they are afforded ownership over
their transitional justice experience. Additionally as will be demonstrated, TRCs inclusive forum allows youth to demonstrate their capacity to act as political agents. In particular, by providing submissions to TRCs either in writing or at open or closed hearings young people are given the opportunity to speak for themselves, rather than having others speak for them.

Creating the Social (Collective) Identity

The notion of identity refers to ‘peoples’ membership in social groups, whether that membership is chosen by them or ascribed to them by others’ (Arthur 2010: 6). Specifically, identities are descriptive frameworks that reveal a collective groups relationship to the social and political world. These classifications denote broad social expectations and impose characteristics on individuals based on 'historical practices, cultural norms, social attitudes, religious values, legal dictates or the needs of the society' (Lee-Koo 2015: 10). The problem with social constructions of identity is that they are based largely on the community perception and thus leave little room for self-identification.

Moreover, what complicates this classification process is that individuals within these broadly defined constructs often occupy crosscutting identities. Indeed, the realities of people’s experiences and interests are often not easily defined. Social group identities present a significant challenge for transitional justice, as whilst we are now able to look beyond the victim/perpetrator participatory model, these classifications remain synonymous with how we describe the experiences of traditionally marginalised social groups, in particular youth.

Dichotomous Representations

Notions of victimhood and deviance dominate understandings of youth in transitional contexts, in large part because empirical research has focused on explaining young people’s experiences as either victims or perpetrators. In particular, alongside an extensive body of work that assesses the situation and motivations for the recruitment

---

2 A similar version of this section is being published as part of a chapter on Youth Engagement in Transitional Justice in the forthcoming book Transitional Justice in the Solomon Islands edited by Renée Jeffery.
of child soldiers (Singer, 2006; Gates and Reich, 2010; Cook and Heykoop 2010) sits a substantial set of studies that explore the notions of youth deviance and savagery, specifically the impact and legitimacy of the youth bulge (Macdonald 2008: 140–141; McEvoy-Levy 2011: 167; Urdal 2006: 612–613; Collier and Hoeffler 2004: 569). Together, these literatures have served to solidify the position of the victim/perpetrator binary at the centre of current understandings of young people in transitional contexts.

Within this binary youth are thus described, on the one hand, as children, passive and vulnerable to manipulation by adults. The underlying premise of this classification is that ‘children need special protection because they are innocent and dependent actors in an adult world’ (Schwartz 2010: 20). Specifically, this description of young people assumes that they are merely subjects and recipients of peace without the capacity to meaningfully engage in the social and political world. Similarly, under this construction of identity youth are viewed as ‘being apolitical, sheltered and separate from the political realm, but also, in the case of children in conflict zones, it regards them as only ever victims of adult political action’ (Lee – Koo 2015: 15). Indeed, the literature on child soldiers highlights children’s lack of agency and capability. For example Kemper suggests, that armies view ‘younger generations as cheap, effective, and obedient fighters’ (2005: 8). That is, key stakeholders (specifically militants and rebel groups) perceive young people as submissive targets for recruitment.

At the same time, notions of deviance, savagery, and violence are also common classifications used to describe youth. Specifically, the literature on human security represents youth as a ‘security threat’ and a ‘demographic ticking-time bomb’ whose propensity for instigating violence and spoiling peace needs to be managed (McEvoy-Levy 2011: 167; Goldstein 2001: 11; Macdonald 2008: 140). Moreover, commonplace throughout the literature is the notion that mechanisms need to be implemented to address a perceived ‘crisis of youth’ (Peters 2011: 232–233). Namely, depictions of youth ‘frame young people in pejorative terms, as deficient… delinquent… or dysfunctional’ (Boyden 2008: ix). Yet as an examination of youth’s participation in the Solomon Islands TRC demonstrates, the roles they play in conflict and transitional environments are more nuanced than these frameworks suggest.
Indeed, the protectionist lens underpinning notions of victimhood is problematic as it relies on the belief that children lack capacity (Kemper 2005: 8-9; Schwartz 2010: 10-11). It promotes an image of young people as passive subjects, lacking the potential for agency often demonstrated by the youth demographic in post-conflict environments. Similarly, the deviance lens is troubling as it fails to capture the nuances of youth’s role in conflict and post-conflict contexts. Both representations of youth obscure the multitude of other, often overlapping roles that youth in particular, take on in conflict and post conflict environments; as peacemakers, mediators, survivors, activists, and storytellers (McEvoy-Levy 2006: 18-25; Helsing et al 2006: 195-217; Senehi and Byrne 2006: 236-237).

Although youth are said to ‘inherit…the results of transition’ (Smith 2010: 33), their often unique views and capacity as stakeholders have not produced the same degree of enquiry as children. In fact, scholarly examination of youth in the transitional justice contexts is extremely limited (Eyber and Ager 2004: 189-209; Utas 2004: 209-236; Hart 2008; Schwartz 2010; Pruitt 2013). Notably, because the UNCRC includes an age restriction of 18 years and under, the rights based approach excludes a large portion of the youth demographic (Schwartz 2010: 8). Indeed, when they are considered, the experiences of youth are most often combined with those of children (UNICEF 2010). Moreover, their varied interests are relegated to a secondary position in the commonplace rhetoric of ‘children and youth’ (Ramirez-Barat 2012). That is, the needs of youth are at best conceived as an afterthought, both in practice and in most research conducted on young people in the transitional justice field.

**The Solomon Islands TRC and Youth**

In 2008, the Solomon Islands parliament passed the *Truth and Reconciliations Act*, which formally established the TRC and its mandate (TRC Act 2008). The purpose of this TRC was ‘to investigate and report’ on the causes and impact of violence which occurred between January 1st 1998 and July 2003, commonly known as ‘The Tensions’ (TRC Report 2012: 15). After several false starts due to logistical and financial constraints the commission was launched in 2009 by Archbishop Desmond Tutu in Honiara. Between
2009-2012 the TRC gathered 2362 public statement and held eleven public and 102 closed hearings. In 2012, the five-volume report, which constituted of testimony from victims, perpetrators and the broader community, was handed over by the Commissioners to Prime Minister Gordan Darcy Lilo. Four years on there has been no institutional acknowledgment of the report and successive governments have failed to formally release or table it in parliament.3

The core mandate of the Solomon Islands TRC was to promote ‘national unity and reconciliation by engaging all stakeholders in the reconciliation process’ (TRC Report 2012: 9). Moreover, several demographics were identified as ‘thematic’ stakeholders in the process, in particular, women, ex-combatants, children and youth. In the case of youth, the TRC highlighted their role as key agents in the justice, reconciliation and development process occurring in the Solomon Islands. Indeed, the report specifically acknowledged their role as ‘productive citizens of this nation’(TRC Report 2012: 722). Yet, to fully understand the importance of this classification by the TRC, it is necessary to consider the true nature and extent of their participation in the process.

**Revealing the Ambiguities of Identity: Youth Participation at the Solomon Islands TRC.**

The case of the Solomon Islands reveals an ambiguity to youth’s identity that is not reflected in the dominant identity frames employed by the transitional justice field. Specifically, young people have a complex, fluid relationship with conflict and transitional justice that cannot accurately be reduced to their position as either a victim or perpetrator. For example in the Solomon Islands youth were key participants in the justice and reconciliation process undertaken by the TRC, as they took on a multitude of roles from statement taking to grave digging, research and transcription.

As one Ministry Official described ‘we gave the youth the jobs, because they were hungry, they wanted to be part of the reconciliation – as they saw this as the future

---

3 In 2013 the editor of the report Father Terry Brown unofficially released the TRC Final report and its recommendations online. This act has received both support and criticism in the Solomon Islands.
This sentiment was echoed by one of the trauma counsellors working with the youth demographic who concluded ‘the youth – they mobilized. Fieldworkers mostly were youth and Statement takers, mostly were youth. Most of them were graduates from the university here’ (Interview with FK 2015). These statements about youth’s participation are significant because not only do they demonstrate the willingness of young people to participate – but they also depart substantially from the views of most government officials and the broader community.

From a logistical standpoint youth’s participation at the Solomon Islands TRC process was so widespread that the process would have been understaffed without their participation. As the Director of the Ministry of National Unity and Peace (MNUP) explained ‘the youth, they came when we called, we used them in every area of the TRC’ (Interview with RL 2015). Indeed, this widespread participation evident at the TRC challenges the stereotype that youth are disengaged and uninterested in the politics of their community. Instead, it supports the body of empirical research emerging in the peacebuilding field that demonstrates youth’s capacity to act as ‘agents of change’ or entrepreneurs of peace (Pruitt 2013; Schwartz 2010; Galtung 2006).

In addition, a researcher at the TRC highlighted one of the benefits of engaging young people in the TRC process, as he explained ‘youth talking to youth, it is very powerful, they bring each other in to the process, their friends, youth have chains of networks... they want to share their stories with each other’ (Interview with Rex 2015). Indeed, these interviews reflect the fluidity associated with identity that is often not captured by retributive mechanisms of transitional justice, which adhere to strict procedural rules. Significantly, the open and inclusive process that TRCs enable creates space for youth to actively engage as political agents. Moreover, these responses from members of the Solomon Islands community dispute common claims throughout the transitional justice field that young people exist primarily in the private sphere (Lee-Koo 2015: 87). These interviews, therefore, reveal youth distinct capabilities to contribute to justice and reconciliation in transitional context, thus refuting the notion that they like younger children lack the agency to understand and engage in the political process.
Despite these positive representations, the institutionalised aspects of the TRC portrayed a very different narrative. Specifically, the final report of the TRC emphasized only their vulnerability, and described their experiences through the victim/perpetrator model. For example, the two primary headings of the children’s chapter are ‘Children as Victims’ and “Raskols” and militants: Children as perpetrators’ (TRC Report 2012: 626-647). In addition, while children and youth were considered separate demographics during the collection of testimony, this distinction did not carry through to the report.

Similarly, when community members where asked to describe youth’s engagement with the TRC the general sentiment was that youth were ‘too focused on smoking, drinking, chewing the beetle nut’ (Interview with RL 2015) to know or care about the TRC. Furthermore, many referred to youth’s irresponsible behaviour explaining that ‘the youth, they are babies having babies, they participate in reconciliation to get the money that’s all’ (Interview with FK 2015). Moreover, when key stakeholders in the community where asked to describe youth’s role in the conflict and their participation at the TRC these responses portrayed youth as a group of people who were ‘lost’, ‘manipulated’, and ‘vulnerable to the big boys’ (Focus Group 1 2015). Notably, the general sentiment amongst these individuals was that youth were ‘helpless and needed the community to protect them’ (Focus Group 1: 2015). Indeed, one participant highlighted the continued presence and trouble caused by the ‘mastu liu’ in Honiara (Interview with CL 2015). The contrast between these representations of youth identity is striking. The latter projects the idea of weakness and vulnerability (an identity ascribe by the broader social community), while the first demonstrates a future driven, capable and engaged identity (a self- representation, straight from the mouths of babes).

Although this contrast is problematic it nevertheless highlights the importance of talking directly with young people in the Solomon Islands. Specially, gathering responses from youth (and those who interacted closely with youth) dispels the common assumptions about their needs and interests sustained through the victim/perpetrator binary. In doing so, they also reveal significant problems with the formal classifications of young people at the institutional level. Namely, youth’s participation at the TRC exposed a problematic disconnect between the narrow picture of youth constructed in the TRC
document and by external actors and the on-ground reality of youth’s capacity to engage with the justice and reconciliation process. These differences indicate that social constructions of identity ascribed by others often fail to capture the true nature and magnitude of young peoples’ experiences and interests. TRCs therefore, are instrumental as they allow youth to challenge these narrow assumptions, by providing alternative descriptions of their contributions and interests regarding justice and reconciliation.

Expanding the Nexus: The Fluidity of Identity.

Social identities are influenced by many factors, including cultural values and social practices therefore they are not static or fixed. Yet, depictions of young people that adhere to the victim/perpetrator binary fail to depict this fluidity. That is, depictions of youth’s role in transitional contexts, which ascribe only to these identity constructs often do not account for the on-the-ground realities of their experiences. Moreover, these constructs allow for variations in youth’s identities that are derived from the often-surprising ways in which young people interpret their social and cultural surroundings.

Notably, understanding youth's participation in transitional processes in the Solomon Islands requires the recognition that they often assume multiple, constantly shifting identities. As a result, young people occupy the grey spaces between victim, perpetrator and political agent. Many of the interview participants highlighted this fluidity and uniqueness when asked to describe their role in the reconciliation process. For example, the representative of the national youth parliament explained:

The adults they viewed us as puppets we were the victims and the ones thrown in jail, but we are also the ones with the knowledge and the future (Interview with HJO 2015).

Similarly, another interview participant suggested that:
It is very evident that young people are involved they are the ones visibly doing the looting in the crisis they were also the victims. But to see them wanting to be involved in the reconciliation, in making the future that is also positive for me. (Interview with BJO 2015)

As the above responses indicate, youth’s role in the Solomon Islands justice and reconciliation process was multifaceted. Indeed, many interview participants that had direct contact with the demographic during the process reinforced this complexity. They highlighted youth’s role as an active agents, who play distinctive roles as opposed to just being passive subjects of others experience. In addition, many suggested that youth’s unique and intricate relationship with the conflict ensured that they were key assets to the Solomon Islands transitional justice process. As one TRC employee described:

These youths they were witnesses, they were witnesses to murder. They didn’t feel good about holding onto these secrets for all these years, they believed in reconciliation. The elder people didn’t realise that these young people witnessed these things, they helped us solve of a lot of questions, murders and disappearance. (Interview with CL 2015)

The perception that youth’s participation should be viewed as active rather than passive was reoccurring amongst those who directly interacted with youth during the TRC process. Perhaps most surprising, however, was the interpretations by these interview participants that youth yielded significant power over the reconciliation and justice process. For example, when asked to describe youth’s interactions with the TRC this staffer’s responded:

During the conflict, they were militants, but in the TRC, youth’s response is that they were very willing to come forward, they want to reconcile, they want to forgive. They were victims but many of them were also perpetrators, they were used to take the messages across the rivers to the Islands, they went through a lot of hard time, some were killed, some were shot. The tension was mainly around youth, first they
carried the messages, carried it across the river, they could run fast. They were witnesses, who was talking to who, who was in which area, they relayed these messages. Now in the TRC we found that information out and the Youth they were very willing to tell the stories, to talk, to participate. (Interview with CL 2015)

These statements reflect the general sentiment of those who had worked directly with youth during the reconciliation process, including church and youth leaders, trauma counsellors and statement takers. Furthermore, these interviews highlighted a need to conceive of youth identity in the Solomon Islands in a more open manner. More broadly, they indicate a need to engage with youth’s relationship with reconciliation practices in a more nuanced way, that acknowledges their active role in conflict and transitional environments.

Claiming ownership over identity

In the Solomon Islands, youth’s role in the reconciliation process was inextricably tied to the future. In fact, many interview participants reinforced the notion that youth’s relationship with the transitional justice process was forward-looking and development focused. Specifically, youth self-narratives highlighted a capacity building response to transitional justice. As one interviewee explained: ‘we participate because we need a future… and reconciliation may give us the future’ (Interview with RA: 2015). Similarly, a representative of the national youth parliament suggested that: ‘we inherit the unfinished business of truth and reconciliation. But with the right support, things can improve for us’ (Interview with Youth Representative: 2015). At the centre of this narrative is the notion that youth have the capacity to participate in transitional processes in a manner that is mindful of the nexus between justice, reconciliation and development.

In addition, youth’s responses challenged the common perception that young people are all pre political or that they are ‘yet to develop an individual political consciousness and the capacity to bear the burdens’ of participation and agency (Lee- Koo 2015: 15). When asked to describe youth’s role in the TRC process terms and phrases such as ‘opportunity’, ‘important for the future’, ‘empowered’ and ‘having a voice’ dominated the
discussion (MNRUP Interns Focus Group: 2015). Specifically, many emphasised ‘the need to express themselves’ (Interview with RA: 2015) as a key motivation for their participation in the TRC focus groups and special hearings which took place. These identity constructions are significant as they illustrate potential and responsiveness. Further, they challenge the simple identity constructions traditionally ascribed to them by other actors in transitional contexts.

These interview responses are indicative of the belief amongst Solomon Islander youth that they are uniquely positioned to participate in the TRC process, as the outcome of the process is tied to their future. As one participant suggested, ‘the youth, we know what is happening, we have ideas for policies, policies that will heal and help us move forward. We want the education and we want the resources’ (Interview with RA 2015). In addition, these interviews revealed the importance of citizenship and belonging to youth in the Solomon Islands. In doing so, they provide credence to scholarship throughout the transitional justice field, which suggests that TRCs are instrumental as they allow marginalised individuals to claim citizenship, through the process of having their voices heard (Fullard and Rousseau 2011). Specifically, these responses reinforce the emerging body of research, which contends that the true value of TRCs is their capacity to allow traditionally marginalised individuals the opportunity to claim ownership over their conflict and reconciliation narrative.

This sentiment was also echoed throughout the youth hearings at the Solomon Islands TRC. For example, Mr. Kwainao remarked:

‘[Youth] can do anything whatever mountain is there, what road there [is], we can jump and we can climb because that is the spirit of young people’ (TRC Report 2012 1016).

Another explained:

‘When you talk about young people, they are powerful just like nature… When young people decide to do things, they can do it without anyone stopping them’ (Belapitu 2010, 1009).
Similarly, youth were explicitly described as ‘the resources of the Solomon Islands’ (TRC Report 2012: 1015). These responses indicate youth’s willingness to take ownership over their future. In addition, they support the notion that young people are important stakeholder as they ‘inherit the results of transition’ (Smith 2010: 33). Notably, youth’s participation revealed the political will, agency and capacity of a demographic traditionally excluded or marginalised by transitional justice processes. Indeed, TRCs challenge traditional understanding of youth in transitional contexts by exposing their capacity and determination to act.

Conclusion

The Solomon Islands TRC process provided youth with the opportunity to demonstrate their capacity to contribute meaningfully to transitional justice and reconciliation. That is, their active participation in the reconciliation practices of the TRC reflected an ambiguity to their identity not commonly attributed to youth. With this in mind, this paper calls into question the continued dominance of the victim/perpetrator classification throughout the transitional justice field. Furthermore, it highlights the importance of TRCs to the development of transitional justice processes which are inclusive and community focused. Indeed, this paper contends that the true value of TRCs is their capacity to engage and elicit the participation of traditionally marginalised individuals, specifically youth.

Yet, this process is not without its limitations. Indeed, this paper also highlighted some of the challenges associated with accurately representing youth’s experiences in the transitional justice field. In particular, it revealed the persistence of the victim/perpetrator binary at the institutional level. In doing so, it emphasised the complexities associated with creating a narrative of youth participation, which balances the on-ground realities of youth and the perceptions of other actors in transitional settings.

References


