

Think Pacific's 2023 Health, Community, and Youth Project

Laidlaw Scholars Programme Leadership-in-Action Project Report

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Introduction

Our team of Laidlaw Scholars, from different cohorts and seven universities worldwide, engaged in Think Pacific's debut project titled "Health, Community, and Youth" within the Waisava and Vunimaqo settlements in the northern Fijian province of Ra, Viti Levu.

Think Pacific often provides two distinct types of projects. While some focus on building development, others focus on delivering workshops with local and partnering NGOs to raise awareness about specific phenomena and realities within the communities. Our project merged activities and aims from usually two distinct projects, transforming it into the following comprehensive five-fold approach:

1. The Community Health Centre Build
2. The Culture Course Sessions
3. Workshops with Diabetes Fiji
4. Workshops with Youth Champs for Mental Health
5. Think Tank Sessions with Community and Youth

In this report, I detail each of these components further. I explore how each unfolded on-site and how sustainability aims to be measured. I also outline my responsibilities and overall experience within each component.

While my personal experiences are closely intertwined with my navigation of all five of the project component's relevant tasks, I try — to the best of my ability — to keep my individualities and reflections stemming from them separate from this report. My report, instead, aims to overview the broader Think Pacific project's initiatives and examine their executions.

My report will address and occasionally quote content from Think Pacific's initial handout about their tailored Laidlaw's leadership-in-action project. Through framing my report in that context, I can more tangibly discuss specifics regarding each component and all aforementioned aspects.

Think Pacific's Health, Community, and Youth Project

The Community Health Centre Build

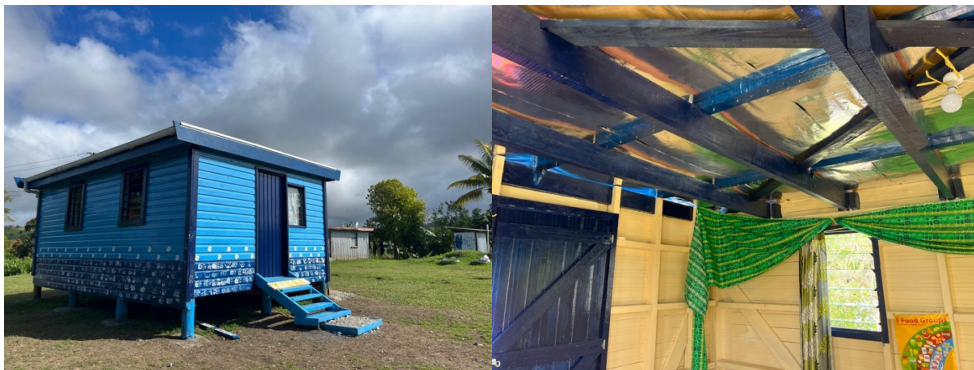
While the build completion was estimated to take six weeks, its actual timeline reflected completion in a little less than three weeks instead, which was a pleasant achievement for us all. Think Pacific outlined "creating a nursing station (health centre) to expand the provision of medical care and increase the capacity of the local nurses and health teams in rural settings." Once living in the settlements of Waisava and Vunimaqo, we found how building this community health centre, commonly referred to as a dispensary, would immensely benefit the community's health worker.

The community health worker, elected every few years, performs health check-ins with settlement's residents. Responsible for caring for the health and wellness of all families in that space, the community health worker benefits from the construction of a physical workspace helps since it helps her ensure more privacy and confidentiality when meeting with her patients.

Once inaugurated as the Dreketi Dispensary, the community health centre served as a meeting point for 200+ iTaukei Indigenous Fijians to procure medical services. Scholars facilitated registration and delivery of medial screening services. Prior to the existence of the community health center, accessing medical services was more challenging to access when

combining travel distances, financial costs associated to transit, and individual awkwardness or self-consciousness in receiving the necessary medical attention.

But on August 8, one scathingly hot Fijian day, we saw people from even further settlements down Dreketi Road walk up to seek medical check-ups and general medical information from local partners. While many men, women, and children from the Waisava and Vunimaqo settlements still relied on Scholars strongly nudging them to register for medical screenings, the morning showed how the presence of the community health center already suggested more accessibility for seeking and receiving available medical services.



Dreketi Dispensary in Waisava & Vunimaqo settlement

The Culture Course Sessions

While Fijian men worked with Scholars towards building the community health center, Fijian women planned and delivered what Think Pacific names ‘culture course’ sessions, generally following themes of identity & custom, perspective, art, and food. These usually happened after our morning shift at the build site, and they fostered a space to engage in the following more craft-like activities:

- Learning about our host family’s genealogy and how they’re inter-related within other families within the settlements
 - Differing greetings between different generations
 - Each family’s qau (plant), kitou (animal), and dole (fish)
- Weaving fans and mats, baskets and bracelets
- Cooking vakalolo dessert
- Sculpting a bilo

According to Think Pacific, “the course aims to educate participants about the nuances of indigenous Fijian culture through structured sessions.” The culture course “aims to stimulate engagement with and revitalise local customs and traditions amongst rural youth.”

As these sessions unfolded within our first few weeks in the community, I was reminded of something my mom told me before I moved from Brazil to Canada: “You only learn about your culture once you leave your country.” Within the context of immersion in indigenous Fijian culture through the kind delivery culture course sessions by, mostly, the Nas (Fijian moms), the

reality of how we were mutually learning about the uniqueness of our individual cultures once we encountered someone from a different culture surfaced. Because of such genuine, light-hearted connection through intercultural exchange, my experience of the culture course sessions was greatly positive. From plenty, I describe the following three personal anecdotes highlight this further:

1. On July 15, during our first week in the settlement, we learned about family genealogy in the Indigenous Fijian context. This included ways to formally address relatives. Two terms ('lavo' and 'tako/ako'*) exist in Fijian for that. It always stems from the male relative (father). If one's father is referred as 'lavo,' then their children are 'tako,' and vice-versa. But for us Scholars, we were taught to greet people we walk past in the village by saying 'lokokai/akokai' because it's a general greeting when you don't know the exact lineage. One day, my Na (Fijian mom) told me that she enjoyed hearing me say 'Yadra, Lakokai/Akokai!' because they don't hear it often. They all know each other's genealogy and, therefore, family-related ways of addressing each other.
2. On July 24, after our culture course session where we weaved our own baskets using coconut tree branch, I showed my isu (basket) to my Na. She shared how, together with ta (Fijian father), they sell the baskets for 5 Fijian dollars. They sell the baskets as a way to carry the cassava that they farm. When I asked how they say 'cassava' in Fijian, Na shared it's 'tavioka,' which instantly reminded of how in Brazil, we have this food called 'tapioca,' and it's made of cassava flour. I remember sharing that with her, and being joyful in imagining that something from my culture may have stemmed from Indigenous Fijian culture.

Both instances offer a glimpse into the ongoing cultural exchange that I cherished from the culture course sessions. It has offered the space for unexpected, genuine cultural exchange. It has also allowed for opportunities for me as a Scholar to see my culture through a Fijian lens and share it with my Fijian family more about my culture, and from my experiences and interactions, has offered moments for Fijians to celebrate little details unique to their Indigenous culture.

Workshops with Diabetes Fiji

Once the community centre build was complete, the Scholars team switched into the workshop participation and facilitation component of the project. Our work with Diabetes Fiji mainly consisted of facilitating smaller-group discussions about communicable (CDs) and non-communicable diseases (NCDs). These include typhoid, dengue, leptospirosis and diabetes, hypertension, and cancer — respectively.

Our conversations strived to raise awareness about how current Fijian lifestyle choices increasing the likelihood of developing communicable and non-communicable diseases (e.g.: mostly carbohydrate-based diet combined with sedentarism). This is because a lot of structural circumstances shape the environment and habits within the settlement. While Fijians in the community shared that learning the information was valuable, they will act upon this information within their reach and circumstances. From the availability crops farmed to the contrasting costs of different products (like poultry and eggs versus flour and bread) to the absence of incentives to reduce salt intake and increase regular exercise, aiming to transform those choices implies long-term circumstantial and behavioral changes.

Workshops with Youth Champs for Mental Health (YC4MH)

Similar to the workshop sessions with Diabetes Fiji, YC4MH strived to raise awareness about mental health to fight its stigma within the Fijian context. YC4MH also encourages conversations about unspoken and stigmatized topics, especially to prevent death by suicide.

Their staff employ creative and engaging approaches. Each session began with dynamic energizers to uplift people's mood after lunch. One activity that, unfortunately I had to miss for health reasons, but that I heard from my Laidlaw peers that was super impactful involved visualizing how a web of mental health stigma develops based on our prejudices and hurtful comments towards an individual.

One of the YC4MH staff stood in the center. Participants held string and, after saying a potential hurtful comment towards the staff based on assumptions about their identity, the string bundle was tossed across other participants circling around her. Overtime, these comments compounded into a web, trapping the individual inside and showing how they are now stuck in the stigma and, thus, unable to ask for the help and support they need.

YC4MH delivered their work with amazing creativity, and at times, even unexpectedly yet healthily triggered feelings of grief that I'm still navigating within me. My conversations and interactions with YC4MH have been incredibly positive, and their lively presence and content delivery has been memorable for the community. They grasped at the differences between mental illness and mental health, for example, and opened up about struggles they face that can potentially impact their mental health.

Think Tank Sessions with Community and Youth

Towards the nearing completion of the project, Scholars and Fijians collaborated in smaller-group discussions to brainstorm and pitch potential future projects or collaborations. A summary of the outcomes from these sessions included the following:

- Build
 - plans to build a kindergarten and evacuation center within the settlements
 - GoFund.me fundraiser and Laidlaw Foundation as a financial partner too
- CDs/NCDs
 - Dispensary as a location to house all health-related info from the workshops
 - Partnering with other local NGOs to offer them the opportunity to come into communities and deliver similar workshops
 - Create different forms of awareness campaigns, like radio or comics
 - More hands-on workshop delivery, like a cooking masterclass using farmed crops
- Mental health awareness
 - Survey of community members' impressions/feedback of the YC4MH sessions
 - A gratitude box for members to contribute as they'd like to
 - Further resources and collaboration with Ministry of Health for mental health
- Culture course
 - a multi-media approach through producing video tutorials for the crafting and weaving
 - social media groups to upload all content and for Scholars and Fijians to stay connected



Scholars and Fijians showcasing their work from the Think Tank sessions.

Some

The concept of a ‘think tank’ was very foreign for the Fijians. My Na once shared, over lunch after a session, that she struggled to grasp at what they meant by ‘tank’ within the context of ‘thinking.’ The word ‘tank’ didn’t really seem to exist in Fijian, in such context, at least.

Presentations were informational and thoughtful. Many ideas suggested and with concrete pathways for execution. It’s a matter of either taking on individually as a Scholar to pitch to Think Pacific, another institution, or seek funding elsewhere for personal execution.

My Work & Impact

Personal S.M.A.R.T. Goals

Preparing for this six-week experience in Fiji involved prior reflection and conceptualization of my intended goals coming into that space. With the S.M.A.R.T. acronym in mind — striving to make them specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and time-bound — my three desired goals were the following:

1. Chat (aim for 15 minutes) with one of leader from each of the Fijian local partners to get more insight on their work experience and expertise for the project
2. Chat (aim for 15 minutes) with one person from my host family to gather their life experiences and immerse myself in their way of life (chat to listen rather than to share about yourself)
3. Journal every day after the end of the ‘work’ shift to reflect on the day’s activities and immerse myself in the space and gather knowledge and content for my later final reflection

My initial S.M.A.R.T. goals aligned with my current studies and intended career path. They reflected with my desire to immerse myself more fully and intentionally in that space through conversations with people and learning about their stories.

However, once I arrived in the rural Fijian settlement, I found that they were not appropriately reflecting the dynamic of the space. Life in the settlement was more slow-paced, light-hearted, and simple. Conversations occurred, but not in the in-depth, interview-like structure I expected or sought. Framing these as ‘interviews’ could seem intimidating.

Through going about my day — with the build, workshops, culture course, family time, overall interactions within the settlement space — I collected personal moments instead of individual’s stories. As I gathered these moments, I became more aware of my unique contributions for different impact, based on the languages I speak and cultures I share in.

While I adjusted accordingly, shifting from gathering to sharing:

1. Making brigadeiro with my Fijian family

- a. The idea to bake this Brazilian dessert emerged from the ‘tavioka’ moment.

Cooking together with my Fijian family brought them a taste of my home country, and this dessert had tremendous impact within the village. Multiple families knew about it and, for the sweet tooth Fijians have, they loved this simmered mix of chocolate with condensed milk!

- b. Towards the end of our stay in the settlement, we made Waisava donuts glazed with brigadeiro, and they were stupidly delicious! The fusion of my Na’s baking with my Brazilian cuisine was repeated again once I returned from Fiji. My Na told me she made it for the kids at the local school and they also loved it.

2. Teaching a Spanish and Salsa class for the community together another Spanish-speaking Laidlaw Scholar

- a. Having a third language different from English or Fijian spoken within the settlement caused curiosity among the community. As we picked up Fijian phrases, Fijians picked up a few words of Spanish when another Scholar and I spoke to each other. This led to sparking the idea and desire within us to teach a Spanish lesson combined, because my Laidlaw peer wanted to share this other cultural element, with Salsa dancing.
 - b. The impact was immediate. That same night, my younger sister and cousin had dinner with us and kept practicing the Spanish they had learned earlier. They asked me to learn other phrases, the days of the week, the numbers, and more. One of the Fijian women shared the next day how she appreciated how, in Spanish, we include last names from both our mom and dad. In Fiji, only the male carriers the family name and lineage. Salsa was danced in the final parties leading to our departure too. It was a pleasure to share our Hispanic culture in such way.
3. Writing led into publishing a two-part feature article for *The Sunday Fiji Times*
- a. Thanks to one of the Fijian leader's network and knowing the current Editor-in-Chief at the publication, I managed to write a feature article about the cultural exchange I had been experiencing in Fiji since my arrival. By the time I wrote the article (August 2), I had already experienced the 'tavioka' moment and the brigadeiro making.

- b.** Collaborating together with other Laidlaw peers to share their thoughts and brainstorm ideas so far was central to my writing process. It was also refreshing to write a feature article with limited technology, mostly by hand.

Overall, reframing my goals once I was in the settlement shows that leadership adapts to the special circumstances. Reflecting on my prior goals showed that they needed tweaking to reflect on the reality I was immersed in. Instead of being discarded entirely, they just became a way of navigating the space. From those moments I gathered, I could then transform them into deliverable moments in return to the Fijian community.

Measuring Project's Sustainability

Regarding measuring the project's sustainability, Think Pacific states in their initial project overview handout that "shall conduct a monitoring and evaluation process with the community members, partner charities, government partners, local stakeholders and scholars." They strive to complete this process within 60 days of the project's completion. Afterwards, they shall produce a report to the Laidlaw Foundation and submit it by November 15.

While Think Pacific approaches it institutionally, as a Scholar, I can attempt to connect with community members via social media. Engaging in conversation, whether through instant message or calling services, can help gauge the overall impact of the project's components and how they are being long-lasting in their community.

Sustainability contains multiple fronts. It all comes down to taking initiative upon it.

Conclusion

Think Pacific's "Health, Community, and Youth" project within the Waisava and Vunimaqo settlements achieved the five components it set to do sustainably. Since my core responsibility throughout the project was to consistently participate in activities, my impact is measurable both in my involvement in each of its components and my personal contributions given my cultural and professional lived experiences.

Acknowledgements

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