



# LiA Project Report

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2023

This summer, I had the opportunity to participate in the Community and Health expedition in Fiji, organized by Think Pacific. Dreketi Road, in the Ra province of Fiji, is home to several communities. Our project took place in two communities of the Dreketi Settlement called Waisava and Vunimaqo. On-ground, we had three Think Pacific staff and sixteen Laidlaw Scholars; half of the scholars stayed with host families in Waisava and the other half with host families in Vunimaqo. These two communities are separated only by a river, and both connect to Dreketi Road.

Waisava and Vunimaqo host two clans, the Nawayaga and the Burenitu. My host family, the Rawaqa family, are Burenitu and live in Waisava. While I intend to save my more contemplative insights for my reflection, I must briefly mention that being a part of Waisava and Vunimaqo was the highlight of my time in Fiji. It is difficult to recap what our project accomplished without mentioning the community by whom life was imbued into everything that we did. Although experiencing a subsistence lifestyle made for a challenging environment at times, an essential aspect of the second summer as per LiA Guidelines, the people I had the great honour and privilege of meeting made the experience overwhelmingly meaningful. My time in Dreketi is wrought with lessons I will carry with me for the rest of my life.



*The road pictured is Dreketi Road, the house with the blue dot is my family's home, and the purple line outlines the river separating Waisava and Vunimaqo. Neither community was previously on Google Maps; one of the scholars added pins while on project!*

The scholars on project came from a plethora of schools, including the University of Toronto (4), the University of Hong Kong (3), the University of St Andrews (1), Cornell University (3), the University of Leeds (1), London Business School (1), Durham University (1), and Trinity College Dublin (2). It was lovely to meet a group of scholars with diverse interests and to leave with many dear friends.



*Our team of scholars and Think Pacific leaders before boarding the bus for Dreketi.*

Our project was the first of its kind, combining four key aims that had previously only ever been tackled individually; that is, each had been dedicated to a distinct project by Think Pacific. Over six weeks, about five of which were spent in the settlement, our expedition intended to build a medical dispensary alongside some of the locals, deliver workshops with Youth Champs 4 Mental Health, assist in a community health day with training from Diabetes Fiji, and attend a daily culture course taught by some of the locals.

In addition to these more formal goals, scholars also engaged in the weekly planning of village activities and took part in a Think Tank initiative at the end of project. The village activities often included volleyball, karaoke, Just Dance, assisting the kids with their homework, playing cards, or helping out at home. These activities were another prominent highlight; they allowed me to meet other locals and connect with them cross-culturally. One example of such an exchange was learning Fijian card games and teaching my siblings some of the ones I knew from home!

The Think Tank was a task meant to bring together scholars and the community to discuss the goals that had been achieved and to plan for what sustainable, future-facing initiatives might look like. In the paragraphs following, I discuss the work process, my role, and the end impact of each of these aims.

Building the community medical dispensary was a development project that the Laidlaw Scholars undertook under the direction of a build manager from Think Pacific. In addition, we had several local young men work on the build with us. These community members were meant to be upskilled, learning basic carpentry skills. The construction of the dispensary, requested by the community health worker in Waisava, was led by the Fijian Ministry of Health. The build project contributes to the Fiji National Development Plan and the “Towards a Healthy Fiji Islands” initiative. Each morning, our team would meet at the build site and undertake tasks like painting, sawing, chiselling, hammering, levelling, and more. My active participation in the build allowed me to achieve one of my SMART goals: “work alongside my team members to finish the build project within approximately four weeks.”



*All scholars and our build manager Jim standing in front of the completed dispensary on the day of the opening ceremony.*

Working on the build was a physically challenging but deeply rewarding experience. Once we finished building the dispensary, our team also decorated the outside of the building. To decorate, we painted flowers and had children in the settlement put their handprints on the walls. Most

materials made during our Think Tank, such as posters on disease awareness, mental health and more, were also hung-up inside the dispensary.

Just after the build finished and we had our opening ceremony, Diabetes Fiji arrived at the settlement. Both scholars and some of the community members attended educational workshops led by the organization. These sessions aimed to educate us on the signs and symptoms of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) and communicable diseases (CDs). We were also taught about advice that should be given to those exhibiting some of those symptoms to live a healthier lifestyle. All of these sessions cumulated to a community health day. Neighbouring villages and several health organizations were invited. We had members from the cancer society, nurses from the local hospital and others arrive to provide the communities with free health services. Scholars and other workshop attendees, those from Waisava and Vunimaqo, were stationed in different areas. My role was to take hip and waist measurements for the hundreds of locals arriving for registration inside the dispensary we had built. In the dispensary, attendees also received their height and weight measurements before getting their blood pressure and glucose levels checked out by members of Diabetes Fiji. Scholars also assisted with registration for the cancer society station and supported the visiting mental health organization, Empower Pacific, with their counselling services. Other services offered that day included dental attention, pap smears and breast examinations. The direct impact of the health day was, of course, the medical attention that many of the community members received. Indirectly, the educational material improved the baseline understanding of how to avoid some of the more prevalent illnesses in rural Fiji.

Youth Champs 4 Mental Health arrived around the same time as Diabetes Fiji. We often had a workshop with the latter in the mornings and one with the former in the afternoons. The sessions with Youth Champs were such a joy to attend. We hosted discussions on difficult topics in mental health, often engaging in conversations on depression, anxiety and distinguishing between mental health and mental illness. The sessions were a safe space for youth and other community members to speak about their experiences and stressors, both with one another and with scholars. In my



*Team of Youth Champs 4 Mental Health workshop attendees alongside Agu (front left) from the organization.*

experience, those sessions created room for further conversation in the village. I had some very earnest and thought-provoking interactions with local youth outside of the sessions that I'm incredibly grateful for, and I do think that they were able to happen, in part, due to those sessions.

Another SMART goal of mine was to “help deliver workshops for Diabetes Fiji and Youth Champs 4 Mental Health.”

The culture course was an experiential learning program where local community members led instructional sessions on a variety of topics. These sessions align with requests from the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs and aim to stimulate engagement with and revitalize local customs and traditions amongst rural youth. These sessions were typically held during the same period as the build (i.e., the first few weeks of project). We learned how to weave mats from pandanus leaves, baskets, and fans from coconut leaves. We also learned about Indigenous familial terminology to understand how families are related within the village. Some of the branches we learned include vuvale (direct family), tokatoka (extended family; second cousins), mataqoli (clan; related by blood), yavusa (village or tribe; no longer related by blood) and tikina (distribution or collection of villages in a district). We also learned how to make bilos (half-shells of coconuts used to drink kava, a popular beverage) and bilibilis (bamboo rafts).



*Taking part in the culture course in the community shed. Here, we are using shards of glass and knives to scrape coconut shells for making bilos.*

The course created a dedicated space for us to ask questions and learn about the locals. It was the intricacies of the process that stood out the most, like learning why you needed leaves that were wider for baskets rather than fans or why you needed to put coconut oil on a nearly finished

bilo. All of this knowledge that we would never have otherwise had access to was so enriching; especially receiving it from those who live and breathe it every day. My SMART goal to “attend all Culture Course sessions each weekday afternoon for the first three weeks” was also achieved.

Measuring the sustainability of this project is a complex endeavour because our work encompassed such a diversity of themes. The Think Tank in which we engaged was a testament to this complexity. The Think Tank had scholars and members of the community separated into groups focused on the build, NCD and CD awareness, mental health, and culture. I worked on NCD and CD awareness, and one of the greatest challenges we faced was trying to propose actionable, reasonable, and impactful next steps. Limited resources and funding brought into question the feasibility of every suggestion; it was often quite difficult to brainstorm culturally sensitive ideas that did not presume significant or steep behaviour change.

In closer connection to our project, suggestions were made on how to best use the dispensary. In addition to being stocked with medical supplies from the Ministry of Health, we discussed hosting the existing monthly health check-in with the community health worker there. We also suggested searching for other opportunities; what other organizations, perhaps ones like Diabetes Fiji or Youth Champs, could the community seek to host in the dispensary? It became encouraging to hear that the community health worker had initially applied for the dispensary we built; the initiative does exist in the community, and we hope that some of the ideas we worked on in collaboration with them will come to fruition.

With respect to mental health, a lot of the conversations we engaged in within the workshops were around taboo topics. Behaviour change is always a difficult thing to measure; however, I do believe that the scholars showing what could be possible through vulnerable conversation, by participating in workshops and speaking with youth day to day, was meaningful in some way. Demonstrating a new sense of normal in terms of what can and cannot be talked about within the village is a soft step towards curiosity, and hopefully, increased acceptance.



*Waisava scholars and community members performing a meke on our last day in the village.*

Similarly, I hope that our enthusiasm and interest in the culture course is something that will be carried on by the community youth. I learned that the passing down and understanding of tradition is something that elders are afraid is being lost. For example, we learned about each family’s animal, plant, and fish, but this was not something that all local youth were familiar with. Showcasing culture through clothing, appreciation of food,

curiosity in handmade items, practicing a Fijian meke (a traditional style of dance), and more, was a way for us to highlight the importance of the settlements' ways of life. Demonstrating importance through action and conversation is something that I do hope we accomplished and that will continue to flourish amongst the community youth.

I do not know that I will ever truly be able to capture in words how meaningful this experience was to me. Being completely immersed in the Fijian way of life, bonding deeply with so many people, and having a second family, has been extraordinary beyond articulation. Recounting the project aims and what we accomplished cannot account for the small moments in between, moments of inside jokes, of bursting into spontaneous song or quiet morning walks on the hills. The tangible evidence does exist; the dispensary stands strong in Waisava, and my bilo sits in my bedroom in Toronto. Even so, these outcomes are fiercely contended by the depth of the intangible human connections forged and culture exchanged.