

By William Banner, Laidlaw Scholar, Durham University (2023)



Leadership-in-Action Report:

Think Pacific: Health, Community and Youth Project (Dreketi Settlement, Ra), 2023



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Section 1: Leadership in Action

Description of the Project

Overview

This Leadership-in-Action project¹ was centrally offered by the **Laidlaw Foundation** in partnership with **Think Pacific**, a UK-based social enterprise who have been operating with charity status in Fiji since 2009. On account of two projects being merged, this project was, as described by Think Pacific's Regional Manager Cameron Watson, 'possibly the most ambitious project we have done'. It comprised five components: (1) a community health centre build, (2) a Fijian culture course, (3) a programme in conjunction with Diabetes Fiji concerning both communicable and non-communicable diseases (*CDs* and *NCDs* respectively), (4) a mental health programme with Youth Champs 4 Mental Health, and (5) a Think Tank² where we collaborated with the local community on how to sustain progress on the other four areas into the medium- and long-run.

Village Life

All of this was carried out in addition to a sixth, hugely significant, element: **Village Life**. By fully immersing ourselves in our host families, through sport, music, religion, and more, we had the opportunity to learn a lot more about Fijian culture and begin to understand what 'real' life entailed for our families, beyond what Think Pacific could show us alone. This was for us individually to throw ourselves into, and we got out of the experience what we put in. In return, every day there were scholar-arranged workshops serving as cultural exchange, running concurrently with village sports from 4-6PM. For me, this took the form of running five official (and plenty more unofficial!) Zumba lessons, and co-organising a yoga class. Other scholars also shared their cultures, such as the two South American scholars running a Spanish language and

¹ The Health, Community and Youth Project for Laidlaw Scholars (10th July 2023 to 21st August 2023)

² New for this year, designed to meet the objectives of Laidlaw's bespoke LiA programme.

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Salsa class, and the two Irish scholars running an Irish ceilidh and Gaelic football session. The other contributions were on more universal topics: ranging from karaoke bops to mental health and meditation sessions.

Community Health Centre Build

The **Community Health Centre Build** was the core component of this project – the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs had assigned Think Pacific to work in Dreketi Settlement on the basis of an application from Na Asenaca, the Community Health Worker, for a Health Centre to be built. This would serve as a safe, private place for people in the settlement to come to for health matters, closer than the health centres on the King’s Road, and larger hospitals in RakiRaki, Lautoka and Suva. Importantly, it would help support women’s health (gynaecology), since late detection of breast and cervical cancer, *inter alia*, has been a major problem in Fiji, particularly in rural areas. Building the health centre was a condition for the Ministry of Health to supply equipment, and the scholars and locals worked collaboratively on the whole project, from laying the foundations to the final decorations. This took place across the first 3 weeks of our 5 weeks spent in the village. Whilst we were given the impression that we would be helping ‘upskill youth’, who Think Pacific defined as 18-35 year-olds, we found that the five members of the community assigned to the build were typically outside of this age range, and were highly skilled, having all built their own homes, and, in some cases, worked in the construction industry in Suva when they were younger. A group of six young men, aged 15 to 22, also helped (unpaid) and the five officially working on the build were working nearly double the contracted hours, *id est*, below the Fijian National Minimum Wage, which stood at FJD \$4.

It is important to recognise these problems and many of us brought it up with Think Pacific management, who failed to take adequate action. Nonetheless, the community themselves were very appreciative that the project was happening at all, and I think it is equally worth acknowledging this counter-point in the imperfect international aid and development landscape. As scholars, ‘**change makers**, not change talkers’, my Think Tank sub-group are addressing this in our future Dreketi Kindergarten project, but I would argue that without us

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signing up for the Think Pacific project, Dreketi Settlement would have unfortunately not received the same level of help. This is evident from failed past attempts to secure funding for a Kindergarten from the Ministry of Education. We can only control our own actions, and we have been very vocal in criticising Think Pacific where criticism is due. Yet, I do not regret saying us being there was not a *complete* waste of resources in the respect that Dreketi Settlement would not have had a health centre today if we had not been assigned by the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs in collaboration with Think Pacific. We could only do our best, focussing on our own efforts, showing up³ on time and giving it our all. I always endeavour to do this, and as a leader I want to enable others to do this too. On some days, I admit feeling frustrated, a feeling shared by the leaders, that only four or five of us showed up. We have the right to be vocal about what we thought Think Pacific did wrong, but inaccurately claiming we were starting a ‘civil war’ by building the health centre in Waisava and not Vunimaqo, and not working on the project in protest, was not conducive to the project aims, or meeting the needs of the community. As such, the build took 3 weeks instead of 2.5, and furthermore it actually exacerbated the situation by causing the locals to have to work longer hours on the build. I personally made the most of the experience and the community were grateful for that. Being the only scholar from my university on project, I did not feel comfortable raising these counter-arguments at the time, but I wish I had had the confidence to speak up, despite being outnumbered, to a group of my fellow scholars who framed the project as *Laidlaw Scholars vs Think Pacific*, rather than *Laidlaw Scholars x Dreketi Settlement*. I believe, however, that being self-aware of this will help me speak up in the future, and provide an alternative perspective.

On balance, the opinion I value is that of the community, and many were crying with joy at the opening ceremony. Hence, I would still say the project was a success in meeting its goals, aligning with the Fiji National Development Plan’s ‘Towards a Healthy Fiji Islands’ initiative.

The build process will be documented in more detail in ‘Figure XXVII - Namovi Family Photos

³ To quote Susanna Kempe, CEO of the Laidlaw Foundation, Impact Conference, London School of Economics (2022)

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In the first photo are Na Luisa (back row, to my right); Auntie Lisi (back right); Uncle Wais (front and centre); Salote (front right). In the second photo we also have Jone (back), Ta Meli (front and centre); and Viliame (front right).

The Experience' section.

Culture Course

The women (*Na's*) of Waisava and Vunimaqo were given the opportunity to lead a **Culture Course**, which took place every afternoon from 2 to 4PM for two weeks. This component of the project was indubitably a success, involving cross-cultural exchange and empowering the women of the community. Fijian culture is typically an oral tradition, with cultural knowledge rarely written down to be transferred between generations. Increasingly, young people are not always learning all the customs, and this heritage is being lost amongst those growing up in cities especially. As requested by the Ministry of iTaukei affairs, this component aimed to stimulate engagement with and revitalise local customs and traditions amongst rural youth. It aimed to harness a pride in their culture and upbringing and enabled the community to practise sharing the skills and communicate their vast knowledge. It was also a chance for the women to act as leaders, and they listened to questions we had and were very thoughtful when helping us. Think Pacific typically asks the villages to derive a curriculum covering: identity and custom, perspective, art and food. The culture course also takes into account of regional differences, with Ra notably having many customs distinct from the rest of Fiji, for example saying '*Yadra*' as a greeting all day instead of '*Bula*', and the custom of calling someone '*lavo*' or '*tako*'. Table I summarises the timetable for our culture course:

Table I - Culture Course Itinerary

Date	Culture Course Activity
Monday 17 th July	Vuale (Family Tree)
Tuesday 18 th July	Farm Visit
Wednesday 19 th July	Fan Making

Thursday 20 th July	Bilo Making
Friday 21 st July	Bracelet Making
Monday 24 th July	Isu (Basket) Weaving
Tuesday 25 th July	Coconut Oil Making
Wednesday 26 th July	Small Mat Weaving
Thursday 27 th July	Small Mat Weaving
Friday 28 th July	Vakalolo (Fijian Dessert)

'Vuvale' means family in Fijian. Large families live together and often next door to extended family. This was the case in our family, with Ta Meli's brother Uncle Wais next door. Marriage is patrilocal, meaning the daughter-in-law moves in with her husband's family at marriage. As a result, men usually stay in their home province, but women often come from different provinces. For instance, our Na was originally from Nausori and Auntie Lisi was from Lautoka. Nonetheless, they still stay in contact with their families and regularly visit, usually by bus. In Ra, alternate generations are either '*lavo*' or '*tako*' and you would address them as such: '*yadra lavo*' or '*yadra tako*'. For a group of people, you would say '*yadra lavokai, takokai*'. I was a *tako*. As part of the culture course, we were asked to find out our family's fish, animal, and plant. For the Namovi family, the fish was a *moci* (a small prawn), the animal was a dog, and the plant was a *Koka tree*. We were part of the Nawayaga clan who lived in Vunimaqo. Correspondingly, the Waisava settlement was overflow from the Burenitu clan further up the King's Road near Navitilevu village. The dominant family surnames in this clan included Rawaqa and Naika.

On the second day, we went on a tour of the various farms. Uncle Wais gave us an insight into the farm and how he grew a wide range of vegetables including cassava, pumpkin, ochre, watermelon, cabbages, and many more. They used oxen and horses to assist them. Meanwhile, on the other side of Vunimaqo we looked at the sugar cane plantations.

The following day we made *iri* fans by weaving pandanus leaves, displayed in Figure 1. On Thursday, we started making the *bilo* cups, typically used for drinking *kava* (also known as *yaqona* or *grog*)⁴, by hollowing out half a coconut shell and scraping away and shaving the

⁴ I do not drink so I did not try kava, as such I will not go into depth about the kava ceremonies in this report, however other scholars may include it in their reports and more information is available on the Think Pacific Portal.

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surface until it was smooth. We then left it in the mud until the following Tuesday. The process of bilo-making is demonstrated in Figure II. On Friday of the first week, we made the bracelets, also out of dried pandanus leaves. My – rather oversized – bracelet is shown in Figure III.



Figure I - Iri (fan) making



Figure II - Bilo (cup) making



Figure III - Bracelet making

The second week of the culture course commenced with *isu* (basket) weaving. This was the most challenging handicraft we made in the culture course. These are typically sold at market, for around FJD\$5, and take the women of Dreketi Settlement around half an hour to make. They can be used to carry cassava in from the fields. My basket, for which I received much help making, is shown in Figure IV.



Figure IV - Isu (basket) making

On Tuesday 25th July, we collected our bilos from the mud and washed them, before applying extracted coconut oil to preserve them. The next two days we spent working on our traditional

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ibe mats. Our mats were small, doormat-sized, so took about six to eight hours of work in total, but the full-size mats used in homes take on average two weeks to make. Some women also make mats to sell at market, for in the region of FJD\$200. Photos of my mat in process, and my finished mat, are shown in Figure V below.



Figure V - *ibe* (mat) making

On the last day of the culture course, we made vakalolo, a traditional Fijian dessert made from cassava and coconut cream. We made this by first mashing up cassava and wrapping it in pandanus leaf parcels, tying them together before putting them in a big bowl of water on the open fire to boil. In the meantime, we extracted the coconut cream (*lolo*⁵) from the coconuts and heated it in a pan with large quantities of sugar to make a syrup. Then after about an hour, when the cassava packages are taken off the boil and unwrapped, the cassava bundles are repeatedly stretched and hit against a rock until they are gelatinous with a jelly-like texture. Then the bundles are cut up into smaller balls and mixed into the syrup before being served in a bowl.

Our experience of Fijian culture extended even further beyond the culture course, incorporating our interactions with music, food and religion. Another highlight culturally was learning a traditional Fijian dance, a *meke*, for which we split into our two clans, with the 8

⁵ Lolo is also a common nickname for men and boys named Rupeni

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scholars living in Waisava learning one meke, and the 7 of us in Vunimaqo learning another meke, to 'Na Jule Ni Hanahana'⁶, which translates as 'The heavenly jule' with the jule being a small, silver crevally-shaped fish celebrated at Fiji's annual 'balolo' festival. The theme of fishing is reflected in some of the moves of the dance, which include throwing fishing nets, moving waves and acting like the fish itself. This was a great experience, and I loved learning it, with over 40 practices, and we performed it twice including on the last night. I thoroughly enjoyed learning it, especially with all the Na's of Vunimaqo. It was particularly warming to see the respect they give to disabled members of the community, and Sema and her husband Saula – who were both deaf and dumb – were welcomed to join in. The community looked after one another, as I will explain in more depth later, and the Jehovah's Witness church had paid for Sema to have a tablet to use to communicate. Sema is an avid Facebook user, but all of the community had made an effort to learn British Sign Language (BSL) and include her in all activities. She was highly inspirational, with an 8 year-old and a baby, and in our survey with her she indicated that she would like to teach BSL at the proposed Dreketi Kindergarten. Figure VI depicts some of us learning the meke, whilst Figure VII shows some still photos extracted from the video of us performing the meke on our last night in the settlement.



Figure VI - Learning the meke (dance)

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mNmHtfKVksk>



Figure VII - Performing the meke (dance)

Culture is not just about preserving traditions, however, it evolves over time. Modern Fiji is vibrant. Some of my favourite moments were vibing with my brother Jone walking down the road to music coming from his speaker (the 'music box', sweetly called 'Rave Partycast') which our family owned but shared with the rest of the settlement. Some of favourite songs include 'Wiggle Wiggle', 'Waigho' and 'Iko Iko (My Bestie)'. I have compiled all these songs into a Dreketi Mix playlist, which I share in the footnote, along with my Vunimaqo Zumba playlist.⁷ We also had some moving moments singing Jone's favourite songs, 'You are the Reason' and 'Rise' by English singer Calum Scott.

It would be impossible to walk down the street without hearing calls of '*yadra tako*' or '*yadra Vili*' and '*lako mai*' which means 'come here' and then a follow up 'come have tea'. We also got an insight into their regular small pleasures – for example on restful Sunday afternoons they would go as a family on a twenty minute walk to the *bausa*, the Pacific service station which opened in November 2022 on the King's Road just outside of the settlement. They would buy

⁷ https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL6NWEAtCi3DSG_qVCwqm06ByhMYnJdAi – Dreketi Mix
<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL6NWEAtCi3DIq95yuTdxINB7Kth9NIe> – Vunimaqo Zumba

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cookies or ice cream – the 2 for FJD\$2 blitz ice creams are very much missed by my scholar friend Izzy (Vilisi). Figure VIII shows the final trip to the *bausa* on the last Sunday in the settlement, where I bought ice creams for my Fijian friends. The top photo in Figure VIII features (back, L-R): Emori Rairailevu⁸ (14), Waisava; Semisi ‘Mizdo’ or ‘Sims’ Rawaqa⁹ (17), Waisava; and Malakai Levatia¹⁰ (22), Nasukamai. (Front, L-R): Jone Namovi¹¹ (17), Vunimaqo; me, William Banner (21), staying in Vunimaqo; ‘Tui’ Jay Cackau (29 at the time), Vunimaqo.¹²



Figure VIII - A Sunday trip to the *bausa*

⁸ Ashmitha and Tenzin’s nephew

⁹ Catherine and Ruhani’s brother

¹⁰ Mala, who cut my hair for me at one point, was a first cousin of the Rawaqa family and although he was from another village in the same district (Nalawa Tikina), he stayed in Waisava the whole time we were there.

¹¹ My Fijian brother

¹² Tui was Natalie and Cici’s Ta, a cousin of Jone and my siblings.

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On the way back, there was a lovely sunset and then I led an unofficial Zumba class, and we played some football (Figure XII). The photo on the left of Figure IX includes Joana, daughter of Na Asena and Ta Etonia in Vunimaqo; Natalie (back left) and Cici (front and centre); and their Na Moli with her baby. Her first daughter, Frances (4) is in the background being held by Ashmitha.



Figure IX - Sunset on return from the bausa

Fiji time is another intangible concept that we became familiar with, where people would do things at their own pace, and not always recognise scheduled timings. For example, if you bumped into a cousin on the way to meeting another friend, it would not be uncommon for you to be distracted and chat with them for half an hour before continuing to your prior-arranged plans. This concept was particularly clear on Sundays, the day of Sabbath. Church was supposedly at 10AM, but in our settlement this usually meant something like 11.45AM by the time everyone was ready. Since our family was Pentecostal, it did not use one of the churches on the King's Road, and instead a church setting was set up in our own home! (Figure X) The first week, however, the community arranged a service for everyone to attend in the community shed. Figure XI illustrates what church might look like in our settlement, which differs from the experience of going to an official church building.



Figure X - Church in our home



Figure XI - Church in the shed with the whole of Dreketi Settlement

A highlight of my day was the sports time from 4-6PM. (Figure XII) This was a great opportunity for bonding with the whole community, once the children were back from school. We would play rugby, touch rugby and volleyball every day, as well as netball and football to a lesser extent. (Figure XIII) Rugby is a great source of pride for Fiji, and many of the community were excitedly looking forward to the Rugby World Cup, starting shortly after we left the village. The Ra Roosters team, which featured two young men of Dreketi: my nineteen-year-old brother Viliame (then eighteen) and Bill Taria, won the National Cup for the first time in 2022. During our stay in the settlement they underwent an intense two week rugby camp at Ra High School in preparation for their quarter-final match in Suva for this year's tournament, which

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unfortunately they lost 26-23. Sports take place in so many forms in Fiji, and Agu Tuinisau of Youth Champs 4 Mental Health, a leading Trans Activist in the country and former Miss Fiji, shared with me about LGBTQ+ sports days happening as pride events in the country, joking ‘even if you bump into your ex, as the community is small, it is so fun being free as me’. Conversations with Lionel and Agu were extremely touching, as I will explain in more depth later.



Figure XII - Sports in the village



Figure XIII - A typical afternoon in Dreketi Settlement

The children all loved to play, and anything could be made a game. On the first night, after the *Sevusevu* welcoming ceremony, I remember being so stressed when I was taught hand clapping games such as *see-see-see*, *'I wrote a letter'* and *pani*, because Serema (12) and her friends would become (jokingly) frustrated when I would make a mistake and disrupt the rhythm, meaning that we would simply *have* to start again. We exchanged card games such as Irish snap with the community, whilst they taught us *Oyster*. Playing snap, my six-year-old brother Waisake would always sneak in out-of-turn and win everytime. There was a makeshift slide for the young ones in Waisava, but anything could be made a toy and I observed great creativity from the children. Our Ta's mother, who turns eighty this year, has been bedridden in RakiRaki for 3 years, but her wheelchair remains on the porch of our house. Figure XIV shows cousin Navi (16) playing on the wheelchair with Waisake on his lap, and Salote, Joana and Frances surrounding them.



Figure XIV - Playing Fijian Games

The Fijians love to celebrate, and we were fortunate enough to experience such festivities for our welcoming and leaving ceremonies, and for the opening of the health centre. More festivals took place in Raki² too. Just like for many cultures, food takes a central role at such celebrations. On our last day, a *lovo* was prepared. (Figure XV) This is an underground oven, barbecue-esque, used to cook feasts for special occasions in Fijian villages. The traditional technique involves digging a pit into the ground and filling with hot coals. Meat, mainly chicken (beef is generally reserved for funerals) and vegetables such as cassava and taro are cooked. *Palusami* is a favourite dish for many – taro leaves filled with corned beef, onions and the *lolo* coconut cream. Once the food is inside, the pit is covered in banana leaves and left to cook for hours before being unearthed.



Figure XV - Lovo

Mealtimes in Fiji were very different to what we were all used to in our own cultures. We would sit on the floor on the large *ibe* mat cross-legged. Figure XVI This was a challenge the first few times and we would struggle to stand up with stiff legs afterwards. However, we quickly got used to it. Mealtimes would all begin with *mesu* – grace – and washing our hands in a bowl (*vuluvulu*).



Figure XVI - Fijian Mealtimes and Spearfished Fish

Breakfast for us would typically be lemongrass tea, served with a range of things such as *bani* – bread buns – or my personal favourite, *babakau* (a fried dough, usually cut into triangles). Lunch was typically something like fried rice or *roti* with pumpkin. Dinner could be potato curry, ‘daal soup’ or noodles with corned beef. Cassava, the staple crop, was omnipresent. On Sundays we would have chicken or fish. Another unique feature of Fijian mealtimes, and household rules in general, was relating to the concept of levels. In traditional Fijian culture it is polite to stay below people physically to reflect hierarchy. You would have to have the approval to sit on a sofa above the heads of people sitting on the floor, and when you were clearing plates away or in any situation where you would need to walk behind someone, you would have to stoop down and repeatedly say ‘*tilou*’ which means ‘excuse me’. My favourite mealtime was when my brother/*taciqu* Jone had spearfished some fish fresh for us. They also practise line fishing, but this was a traditional method carried out for centuries. Jone informed me that it is best to fish at night, without any torchlight when you get close, so you can catch fish by surprise. Up to twenty could be caught at one time.

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Family is really at the heart of Fijian culture. As discussed in other sections, extended families would live close together and they would all help each other. It was here I truly understood the expression 'it takes a village to raise a child'. In our family's case, our parents and Auntie Lisi and Uncle Wais would share the parenting of our brothers Viliame, Jone and Waisake, Auntie Lisi and Uncle Wais' son Navi, and Na and Ta's granddaughter Salote. The villages were welcoming, kind, noble and compassionate. It was sweet to see that many Fijians in modern society love to use Facebook and messenger, and they would post photos on their story with Fijian song remixes, alongside quotes of wisdom or words of praise for God.

On the flipside, it was clear that patriarchy was heavily embedded in Fijian society. Each village had a ceremonial chief as well as a *turaga ni koro* (often shortened to *turani koro*), an elected village headman position which was rotated every few years. Women were made to sit at the back of the community shed during ceremonies. For many of us, witnessing this strong patriarchal society was very different to the liberal values we had grown up with. However, we were surprised to hear from some of the women that they were happy staying in the household rather than doing lots of physical labour farming. The women had a women's club which met formally every other Thursday night. We also arranged a women's night on the penultimate night, but it would appear that traditional gender roles will remain for a long time whilst the community revolves around subsistence farming.

Diabetes Fiji

Diabetes Fiji was founded in 2012, replacing the Diabetes Foundation which had started work in 1987. This part of the project aimed to increase NCD awareness and educate about healthy lifestyles in the first three days, and then on the last day there was a huge health screening day, with stations for diabetes, pap smear tests, dentists, opticians, counsellors and more.

Diabetes Fiji's long-term vision for Fiji is that people living with or at risk of Diabetes are empowered to take ownership of their health and adapt a healthy lifestyle. They also want the health care providers to be better equipped with knowledge, skills and equipment to provide

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better service with international management standards. Our role as scholars was to internalise this vision and learn what true servant leadership means by collaborating and supporting an influential, grass roots Fijian organisation, which has been praised for its work across Fiji in reducing diabetes.

One of the things we did was set up a nursery to create an environment suitable to growing new crops such as tomatoes. This was located on Uncle Wais' farm and was designed to withstand tropical storms. (Figure XVII)



Figure XVII - Nursery established with Diabetes Fiji

On the health screening day, I was responsible for weighing all 450 people in attendance, and later I worked in a very fast-paced environment as an impromptu dental receptionist. I volunteered for this role and was so mind-blown by what I witnessed. The two dentists served sixty-four patients in one hour and a half. They performed extractions as necessary on 37 of these (with no anaesthetics!)¹³ I was in charge of recording the patients details and blood pressure as they arrived, as well as numbers the dentists would call out to me after the initial consultation, to remind them what they would need to do when the patient came back for extraction the second time around. This system of healthcare was very different from the UK, and although it was probably riskier and less safe than dentistry in some countries, I marvelled

¹³ I was also very surprised at how well most people handled these extractions, with only a few of the children crying.

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at the efficiency and management of the operation. It was a truly effective use of time and the dentists worked so hard. These skills and qualities are something I wish to translate into my own life and role as a leader. Figure XVIII shows aspects of the health screening day.

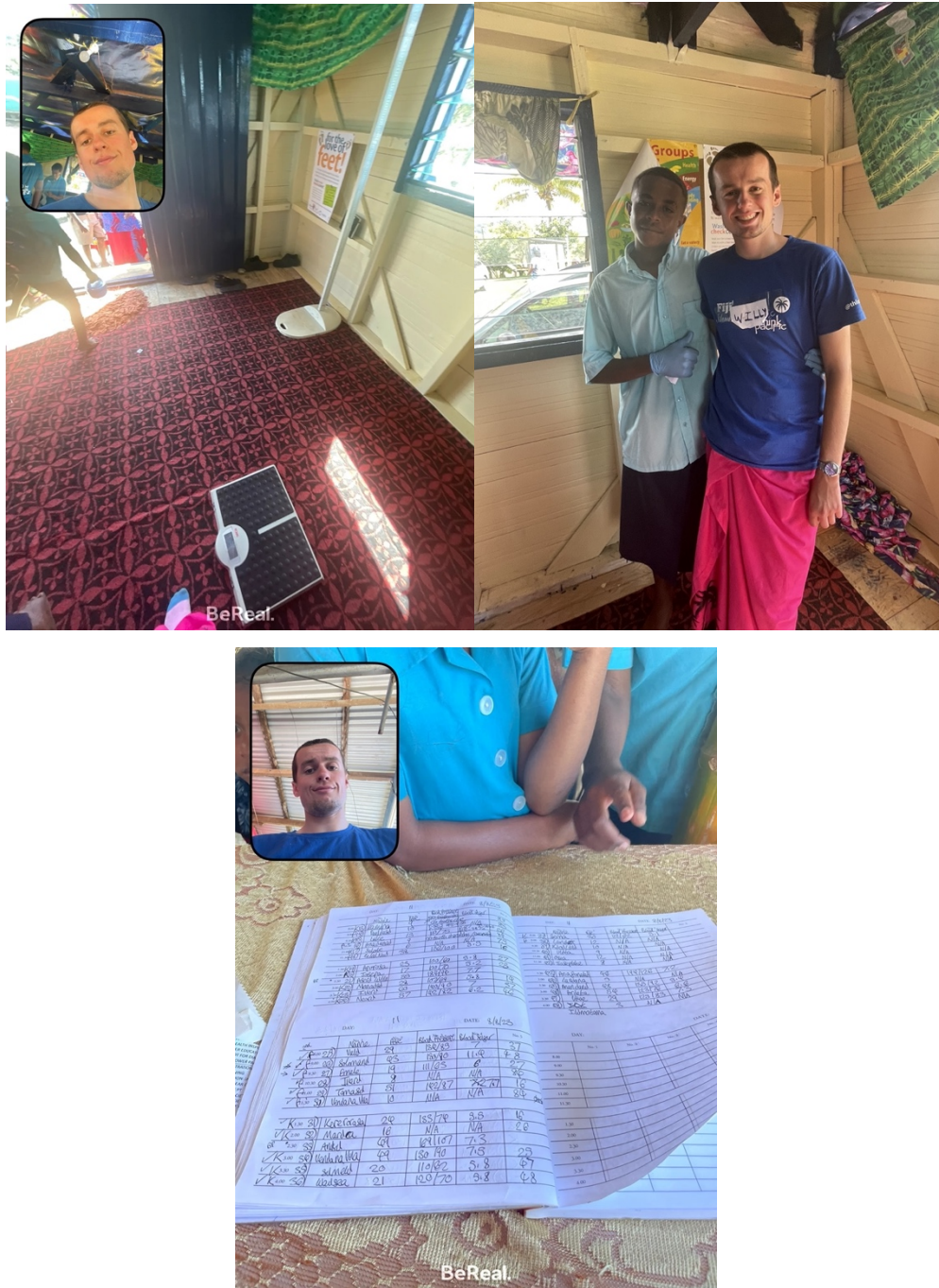


Figure XVIII - Health Screening Day

Youth Champs 4 Mental Health

Meanwhile, the **Youth Champs 4 Mental Health** component was led by the truly inspirational Agu Tuinisau and Lionel Rogers. This outreach programme aimed to promote discussion of positive mental wellbeing and we carried out activities to combat mental health stigma. Prior to our visit, many of the community did not know the difference between the concepts of ‘mental health’ and ‘mental illness’. The charity also works on suicide prevention and operates a helpline. They particularly work with young people, and help communities to understand how to help someone who is struggling in their family.

Youth Champs 4 Mental Health is investing in Fiji’s youth to create sustainable solutions, building capacity for mental health support treatments, and promoting mental health long term. In rural areas especially, there is little awareness of how to promote mental health and support those struggling with mental illness.

Think Tank

For the **Think Tank**, I was in the group reflecting on, and expanding upon, the Community Build. We proposed a very ambitious plan to build a multi-purpose kindergarten and evacuation centre. We set up a GoFundMe and within 24 hours of our initial presentation we had received €2000 of the €15,000 (£3500 or FJD\$37,000) target. This project will be a way of sustaining our impact in the village as will be explained in more detail in **Sustained Impact**.

Having left the village, whilst staying in Sigatoka, we had a virtual meeting with Susanna Kempe, CEO of the Laidlaw Foundation, Nikol Chen, and our community representatives, to talk through the logistics of our idea. Furthermore, we scheduled an in-person meeting with Susanna in Mayfair on Friday 8th September, where we were also joined by Princess Agina. Here we presented our initial proposal¹⁴ and discussed possible long-term partnerships with the Laidlaw Foundation and Laidlaw Schools Trust. We planned to speak at the 2023 Conversations Conference in Dublin and Toronto, to support our fundraising and show students how they can

¹⁴ https://docs.google.com/document/d/1-eFXk4VL2KMjQiYF5_ICWqes2zIVHMPEDOPIMPhmw0/edit#heading=h.tgfwkcpvqdh

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extend the impact of their LIA. Susanna is also contemplating whether to send 2/3 students out to Dreketi each year to complete an LIA based in Dreketi Kindergarten.

Since then, we have spent September contacting build and education NGOs, and the Fijian Ministry of Education. We have also had a meeting with Keeley Wood of the Laidlaw Schools Trust, and I will have the opportunity to go into LST-managed Kindergartens as a former LST mentor to learn about their pedagogy and all the many considerations that must go into running a successful kindergarten.

Stakeholders

Scholars



Figure XIX - Scholars

In our group were 16 scholars and 3 Think Pacific leaders. (Figure XIX - Scholars) These were (back, from L-R): Cici Zhou (20, Cornell University); Me (21, Durham University); Gerd Bizi (21, University of Toronto); Mariela Torroba Hennigen (21, University of Toronto); Ruhani Walia (21, University of Toronto); Natalie Lau (21, University of Hong Kong). On the front, (L-R): Henry Brown (30, Think Pacific); Miliana Taginigauna (32, Think Pacific); Gabrielle Fullam (24, Trinity College Dublin alumna); Beverly Genockey (23, Trinity College Dublin alumna); Isabelle Rosher (20, University of Leeds); Tenzin Kunzang (21, Cornell University); Richita Kudlamath (24, London Business School); Zita Wong (21, University of Hong Kong); Isha Dinesh Sharma (21, University of Toronto); Catherine Lee (21, University of Hong Kong); Ashmitha Sivakumar (21, Cornell University); Mateo Guzman Subiria (21, University of St Andrew's); Richard Evans (37, Think Pacific). Unfortunately, Richita had to leave after a couple of days in the village.

Location

We stayed in Waisava and Vunimaqo, Dreketi Settlement, Nalawa Tikina, Ra Province, Viti Levu, Fiji. Figure XX shows this settlement within the whole of Fiji, in the north-east of the main island, Viti Levu, not far from several ports to neighbouring Vanua Levu, the second largest island.



Figure XX - Dreketi Settlement within Fiji

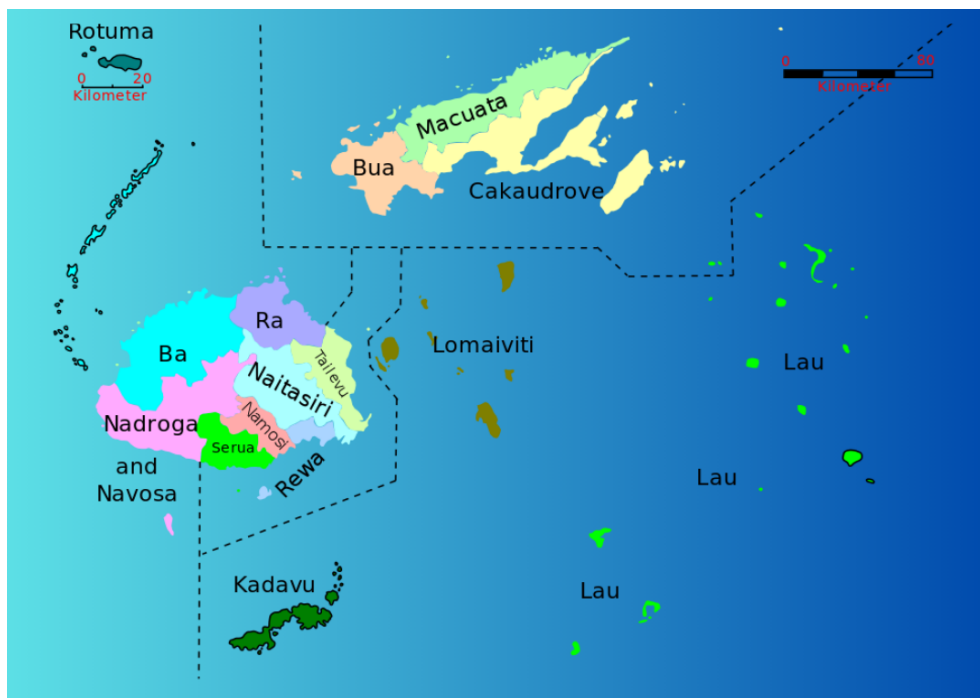


Figure XXI - Fiji's 14 Provinces

By multiple measures, Ra Province ranks as the poorest province¹⁵, with the lowest HDI. (Table II) It was the most heavily affected region by Cyclone Winston, and our settlement had only had power installed three years ago. Our time in the settlement with Think Pacific was the first time they had hosted international visitors, and the third round of international aid. I was informed by my Na that they had all received FJD\$7000 of Australian aid to rebuild their houses following Cyclone Winston, and in November 2022 Live and Learn (a charity which founded its Fijian division in 1992 with focus on sustainability and environmental education) completed a water project involving dams in the forest, which I had been inquisitive about. Before this, they would wash their clothes in the river and drink boiled river water. On the last day, I was given the unique opportunity to go into the forest with my brother Jone and Uncle Wais to see these dams. Uncle Wais told me that the four storage containers could contain water for 4000 people, but because of a relatively small leak – which I saw – only one of the tankers could be filled and the other three were currently going unused. Uncle Wais informed me that they had been told this would cost FJD\$700 to fix, but Live and Learn Fiji had insufficient funds to support

¹⁵ <https://globaldatalab.org/shdi/shdi/>

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them further. Since the settlement using the supplies only had a population of 110, the water supplies were enough for the bucket showers and water-sealed toilets. However, having already proposed the kindergarten idea, this was a valuable lesson for me. I want to pursue a career in international development as a development/environmental economist, but there are a plethora of barriers affecting the efficacy of aid. It was also frustrating to see how a small problem can have a huge knock-on effect. Governments issuing vast sums of aid may not achieve the intended objectives and is wasted. Representatives of NGOs who are operating on-ground can monitor the success of projects and ensure investments are not wasted. As such, I am considering joining an NGO instead of pursuing a job in a governmental International Development department such as FCDO. Or possibly work in such a governmental role but with the aim on improving the efficacy of aid, monitoring – without excessive bureaucracy – whether money flows are fulfilling the desired intention.



Figure XXII - Live and Learn Fiji Dam and Water Tankers

Table II - Fiji's Provinces by HDI

Rank	Province	HDI (2021)
High human development		
1	Naitasiri	0.745
2	Ba	0.736
3	Rewa	0.733


Rank	Province	HDI (2021)
High human development		
–	 Fiji	0.730
4	Macuata	0.721
5	Tailevu	0.720
6	Serua, Namosi	0.705
Medium human development		
7	Nadroga-Navosa	0.699
8	Cakaudrove, Bua	0.687
9	Kadavu, Lau, Lomaiviti	0.681
10	Ra	0.677

Figure XXIII shows the location of Dreketi Settlement in relation to the King’s Road, with RakiRaki (colloquially known as Raki²) located 39km to the North, and Suva located 109km to the South. Along the main road are six churches, one mosque, one temple, a police station, the *bausa* service station, and Ra High School.



Figure XXIII - Dreketi Settlement on the King's Road

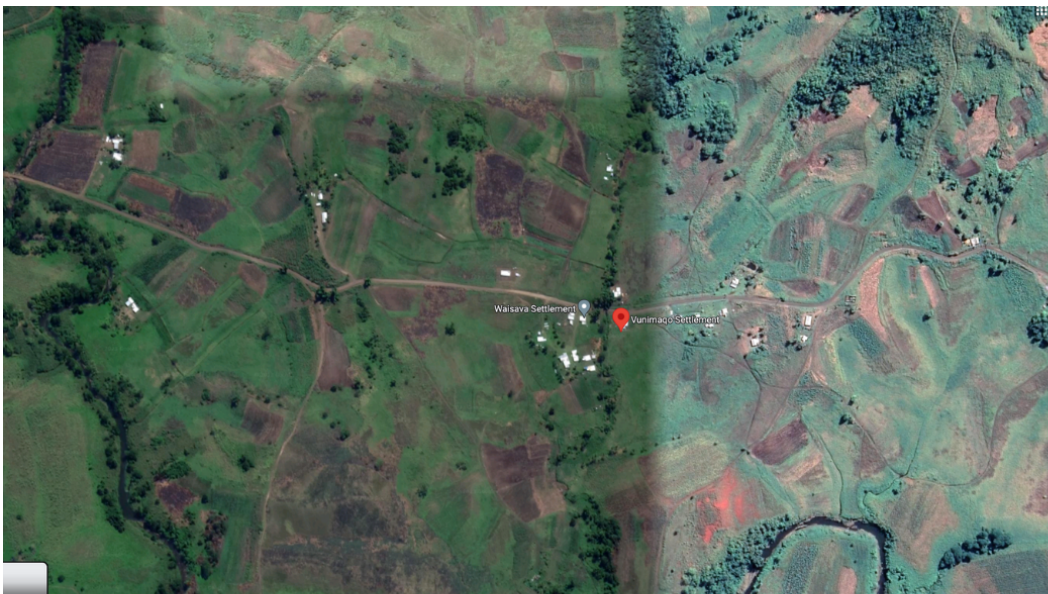


Figure XXIV - Bird's Eye View of Dreketi Settlement

As shown in Figure XXIV, the Dreketi Settlement is an agricultural community and Waisava and Vunimaqo are separated by a narrow river.



Figure XXV - A Labelled Map of Waisava & Vunimaqo

I have annotated Figure XXV to show the locations of our host families' homes, as well as drawing attention to where the community shed had been built, and where we built the health dispensary in Waisava. Also labelled are where we played rugby and volleyball, the proposed kindergarten site, and some of the farmland. The Turani koro's house was built after this Google Maps photo was taken, as was Auntie Lisi and Uncle Wais' house (built December 2022, with the help of Habitats for Humanity who require families to raise 1/3rd of the funding and then match with 2/3rds). Prior to this, Auntie Lisi, Uncle Wais and Navi lived in our family's house in the bedroom built as an extension.

Family

As mentioned before in the culture course section, the *vuvale*, or family tree is very important in Fijian culture. The Burenitu clan of Waisava and Nawayaga clan of Vunimaqo were each made up of a number of families. Figure XXVI shows a diagrammatic representation of my immediate family only, but as highlighted, not all the family lived in the settlement.

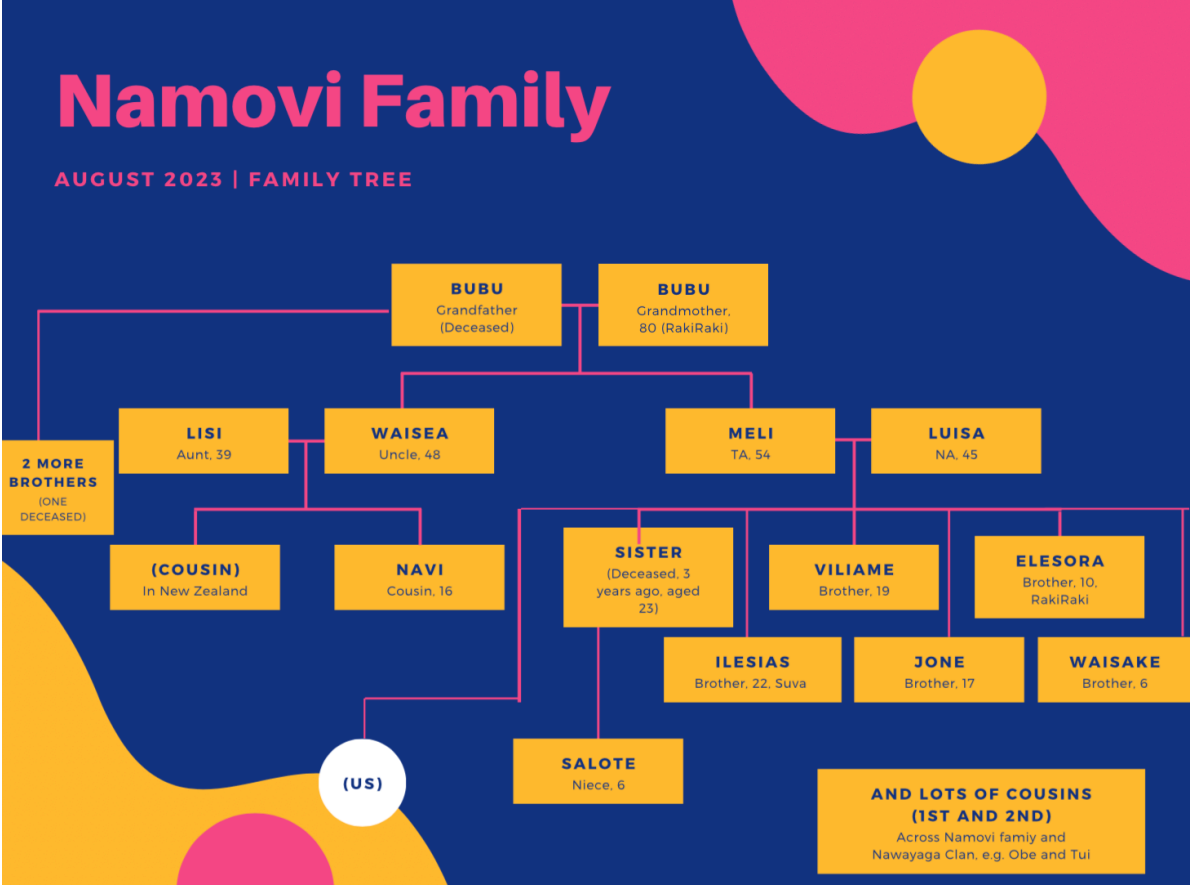


Figure XXVI - Namovi Family Tree

Figure XXVII shows my Fijian family:



Figure XXVII - Namovi Family Photos

In the first photo are Na Luisa (back row, to my right); Auntie Lisi (back right); Uncle Wais (front and centre); Salote (front right). In the second photo we also have Jone (back), Ta Meli (front and centre); and Viliame (front right).

The Experience

I will never be able to explain my experience here as comprehensively as I would like. It was such a truly special, once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that I am so glad I seized, and I am ever-grateful to the Laidlaw Foundation for the opportunities provided to me during my time as a Laidlaw Scholar. Furthermore, some things will remain private and redacted, with the experience unique to me.

Preliminary

After months of preparation, on 2nd July I left my small hometown of Malvern, Worcestershire, not to return for another 58 days, on 29th August, after a lifechanging trip to the other side of the world. (Figure XXVIII) First stop was a week of work experience at the Office for National Statistics in the Darlington Economic Campus.



Figure XXVIII - Leaving Home

On the evening of Thursday 6th July, I travelled down by train to London where I was planning to stay the night before my flight at 9AM to Los Angeles en route to Nadi. However, I faced an unexpected problem. At 11PM the night before flying, I logged into my British Airways account to check in, only to see that I was not shown as flying to Nadi, but instead to Manchester. I had

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had no contact from the airline or anything. Panicked, I contacted Kelci who being at home in Seattle was a lifesaver, giving me the Dawson & Sanderson travel company nightline number. It transpired that my flight, as with 3 of the other 6 flights to Los Angeles that day, had been cancelled. I went to sleep at 2AM not knowing whether I needed to wake up at 5AM. Ultimately, I woke up to hear that I had been rebooked to fly via Singapore 10 hours later, but with a shorter layover in Singapore meaning I would only arrive in Nadi 4 hours later than initially intended, albeit after travelling for nearly 48 hours.

Thus, I found myself with a long wait in Heathrow Terminal 5. To kill some time, I was sat listening to some music. After a while, came on my favourite song Born This Way, for which I choreographed a dance routine for my dance team in Durham this year, and I started dancing a bit with my leg. Then out of nowhere the woman next to me decided to start talking to me and asked where I was travelling. I said 'Fiji' and she gasped, said that was her country, and instantly embraced me, saying '*bula vinaka*'. She introduced herself as Imeri and we spoke lots. She informed me that she had already been on a flight to Los Angeles before it had turned around after 2 hours and she had been rebooked onto the same flights as me. She had been in the UK for the third time, staying the maximum 6 months her VISA would permit to visit her sons in the British Army in Catterick and Ipswich. I was quickly introduced to all her friends and daughter (a nurse in Suva) on Messenger video call. She told me that she had been praying to God that she wanted some company after being made to wait on her own for an extra day, and that she believed that God had sent me. I was invited to go to her house in Nadi (she is originally from Sigatoka) when we were due to arrive in Nadi. This was my first glimpse of Fijian hospitality, and also in belief and religion. Imeri was Methodist, the most common denomination in Fiji (but in Ra it was Jehovah's Witnesses).

Imeri Qolivi, a new great-grandmother who must have been in her late 60s, decided we would stick together the whole journey. (Figure XXIX) When I had checked in my bag, and we had gone through security, we then sat down and out of nowhere my old school's rugby team heading on tour to South Africa appeared out of nowhere and sat by us, another coincidence. I had made a friend in the most unusual of circumstances and of a completely different age group and demographic. This is the art of transformative dialogue which I understand as a Laidlaw Scholar

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and leader. She asked me where I was staying in Fiji and I explained how I was going to Vunimaqo, Ra, but I initially pronounced it as 'Vuni-mako'. Upon showing the written word she told me it was pronounce 'Vuni-mango' and meant 'mango tree' in Fijian.



Figure XXIX - Meeting Imeri in London Heathrow

After our first flight to Singapore of fourteen hours, we reconvened in Singapore, and waited another four hours before our second flight, with Fiji Airways, to Nadi which lasted 10 hours. This was a very good flight, and I was very impressed with the service of Fiji Airways. I was also attended by the same flight attendant, a man called Amenatave, on my return flight six weeks later to Los Angeles, another full circle moment of symmetry for my trip. Upon arriving, Imeri's luggage had been lost on her other flight, so we exchanged Facebooks and I left to go to Smuggler's Cove. Here I met my first Laidlaw comrades, and we were treated to a stunning sunset on the west coast (Figure XXX) before I caught up on sleep ahead of leaving the next morning for Uprising Resort, our briefing location on the Coral Coast on the south of the island.



Figure XXX - Sunset on First Night

Week 1

The project then formally began on Monday 10th July. We spent four nights at Uprising Resort where we bonded with the rest of the team, overcame jet lag, and were briefed on the five elements of our project, including talks from the partner organisations. We were also taught about Fijian culture and language again, to support what we had learnt on the pre-departure portal. During our time at Uprising, we also visited the Arts Village down the road. (Figure XXXI)





Figure XXXI - Staying at Uprising Resort

On the morning of Friday 14th July, we departed for Ra, travelling along the King's Road via Suva. Here we stopped at Jack's of Fiji, where we bought bula shirts and pocket sulus for formalwear, mainly church on Sundays. (Figure XXXII) This was in addition to the Think Pacific t-shirts and pink sulus we had been given for general use. We then had lunch by the port. (Figure XXXIII)



Figure XXXII - Jack's of Fiji, Suva



Figure XXXIII - Port of Suva

Upon arrival in Dreketi at 5PM, we were greeted with a traditional *sevusevu* welcome ceremony. (Figure XXXIV) This included several welcome songs, prayers, and we were introduced to our families. After the ceremony, we went back to our houses and had our first dinner with our whole family.



Figure XXXIV - Sevusevu

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On Saturday, our first full day, we had breakfast (babakau), then a tour of settlement (practising our *Dua o!* entry calls, waiting for a *O i dua!* response), before spending the afternoon playing rugby and games with the young children.

On Sunday morning, we had church in the morning, altogether in the community shed as a one-off (Figure XI). Then we played cards and a few games with the children (vigorous physical activity such as organised team sports are not practised on the sabbath). (Figure XXXV)



Figure XXXV - Sunday Games

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Figure XXXV features my little brother Waisake (top left, age 6). He and his friends all knew the Big Hero 6 handshake, ending 'Ba-la-la-la-la' and would push past each other to have a go at doing it with me.

Week 2

On Monday 17th we were supposed to be starting the build but the build manager, Jimm Tavi, was delayed by a day so in the morning I was asked to teach Zumba for the first time of many, with all the Na's in the village invited to participate. (Figure XXXVI) Millie, our leader, told us that many women do not regularly have the chance to exercise, apart from joining in the afternoon volleyball, and as we would learn later many struggle with being overweight, and having NCDs, such as Diabetes and hypertension, as a result. The session was a huge success with all the Na's loving it and joking when they found things strenuous, but they all loved it and asked for it to happen every morning. I ran a further five official sessions, and also did Zumba energisers during the Diabetes workshop and lots of unofficial sessions in the evenings.



Figure XXXVI - First Zumba Session

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Figure XXXVII - Tired Scholars after Zumba

By Tuesday, our build manager had arrived, and we were able to crack on with the schedule of building in the mornings and doing the culture course in the afternoon. As I have previously gone into detail about the culture course, I will focus on what we covered during the build in Week 2 in this section. We started by digging 12 holes for the foundations, each forty centimetres deep. (Figure XXXVIII)



Figure XXXVIII - Digging the Foundations

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Then, on Wednesday we went to the riverbanks to collect vast amounts of sand and gravel to mix with water and cement powder to make the cement base to pour into the foundations.



Figure XXXIX - Collecting Sand and Gravel from the River

I oversaw measuring the 12 holes in order for logs of the right length to be cut, and for managing where the logs were and instructing people where they would be going. We strengthened each of them by drilling six holes into each and inserting steel rods for stability. Meanwhile, the mixing process was very arduous, and the hardest part of the build physically. Once the cement was sufficiently mixed, we poured it into the twelve holes and evened it out. (Figure XL)



Figure XL - Pouring Cement

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After day 2 on the build (Figure XLI), we hosted a homework club. I helped with a range of age groups and subjects and was surprised to see how similar it was to the British curriculum, and it made me reflect on the legacy and influence the UK still has on Fiji, despite it being independent for 53 years. The older children usually only attended school 2/3 days a week out of 5, to help out on the family farms more. This was a sacrifice that they had to make to support their families, but one of my fellow scholars did not understand that and shouted at my brother Jone at breakfast, telling him off for not going to school. This level of ignorance from another scholar was disappointing and embarrassing, but made me realise that not everyone realises how much our backgrounds and upbringings differ, and the scholar in mention had never left home before, including for university, so it made me think about how my life experiences have made me privileged enough to consider things from different viewpoints, and I hope to continue to be able to reflect on things and learn different perspectives throughout my life. This cross-cultural understanding takes years to develop and can always be expanded.



Figure XLI - Build Group



Figure XLII - Homework Club

On Thursday afternoon we played touch rugby and volleyball (Figure XLIII) before being invited to have dinner at Na Una and Ta Rupeni's house in the evening, with Izzy and Mariela. This was another lovely show of hospitality and kindness. On Friday, after our daytime building and culture course activities, we attended a fundraiser at the Navitilevu Village school nearby, raising money for their sports teams. (Figure XLIV)

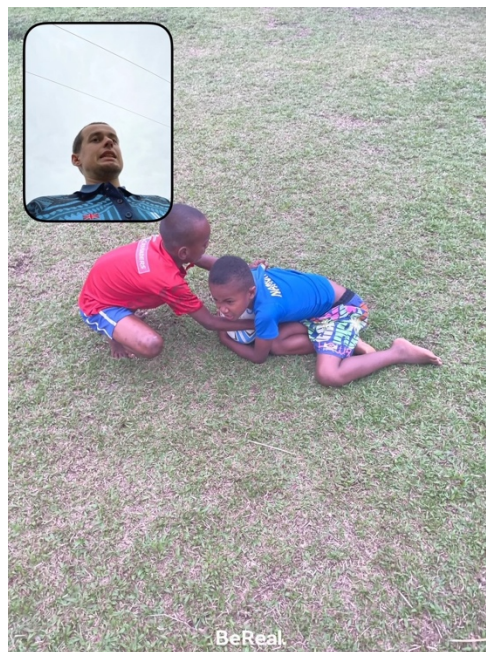


Figure XLIII - This was supposed to be touch rugby...



Figure XLIV - Fundraiser at Navitilevu Village School

On Saturday, we had an excursion to a nearby waterfall. This was a very pretty, idyllic spot but rather than going to the official tourist-friendly waterfall, we were taken to a spot that had not been visited by tourists since Cyclone Winston hit in 2016. This location was very remote, down a long hillside and at the bottom was a hard, slippery rock surface. Two of the scholars were injured and the leaders (Henry, Rich and build manager Jimm) had not brought the first aid kit with them. Fortunately, other scholars had, but the accidents were a narrow-miss from being significantly worse. On Sunday, I was the only scholar to attend church, then subsequently in our weekly debrief, Mariela led a complaint regarding the lack of Think Pacific following risk assessment and safety procedures. Rich attempted to action a few of these in the subsequent week. We were also sad to lose Richita on Sunday, as she left the village to return to India.

(Figure XLVI)



Figure XLV - Waterfall Excursion



Figure XLVI - Richita's Farewell

Week 3

Monday 24th July marked the beginning of the second full week of the build and culture course. This week on the build featured a lot of priming and painting, before these panels were used for the side walls.



Figure XLVII - Second week on the build

On Tuesday 25th, I went with my brother Jone, and cousin Viliame (18) to Mary Laufilitoga's where they played music on the guitar and sang Fijian songs. On Thursday evening, I was moved by Think Pacific staff to the room originally intended for me for disability arrangements (when there are 3 scholars they are meant to be 2 rooms but on the first night I was concerned that the rest of the family would have to sleep in one room so I volunteered to sleep on the floor of the other room with my two fellow scholars). However, moving rooms was a turning point for me as I was able to spend more time with the family, learn and experience so much more, and grow in confidence, all whilst my peers were spending time with other scholars rather than the family.

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On Saturday, we took the carrier for our excursion to the DuaDua resort on the north coast of Ra, stopping in RakiRaki town en route. Figure XLVIII shows me on the carrier with the Turani Koro and Gabi.



Figure XLVIII - Carrier to DuaDua Resort



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Figure XLIX - DuaDua Resort

On Sunday, we found out we were published in the national newspaper, the Sunday edition of the Fiji Times. Here Henry, our leader, had written a two-page segment about our work.



Figure L - In the Fijian Times!

On Sunday, I was the only scholar to attend church in my home and after lunch with Ta Meli's cousins, we went on an adventure, driving to the river where we washed Ta Meli's pickup (used as a taxi service). This was a nice bonding experience with my brothers Waisake and Viliame, and cousin Viliame (18), whilst Navi, Jone and Salote were in Ba at the Jehovah's Witness conference with Uncle Wais and Auntie Lisi (from Thursday to Sunday). (Figure LII) They requested a photo shoot using my phone and described ourselves as the three Viliame's of Vunimaqo (Figure LI). On the way back I rode in the back which was an adventure. (Figure LIII) On

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our return, we bought ice cream and when we got back to the house Kesa and her baby – the fourth Viliame! – were visiting.



Figure LI - The Three Viliames of Vunimaqo



Figure LII - Fun at the river



Figure LIII - Riding in the back of the pickup

Week 4

This week, starting 31st July, we had the target of completing the build. We finished the side walls and worked on the roof and the exterior painting.



Figure LIV - Making Signs

On Tuesday we made the doors, cut out the spaces for the window, and made a sign for the dispensary. I also made a topical 'Yadra!' sign which was initially laughed at by Zita, but Ashmitha and I convinced her it was for the children, and then it was ultimately kept and ended

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up having a central position in the opening ceremony. (Figure LIV) On Tuesday evening we had a late dinner, eating the fish that Jone had spearfished for us. This week was the start of me spending lots of nights at Tui's with Cici and Jone.

On Thursday and Friday, we started the Diabetes Fiji/Youth Champs 4 Mental Health workshops in the mornings and afternoons respectively, with emphasis on education. We also built a nursery for crops as part of healthy eating campaigns with Diabetes Fiji (Figure LV). Youth Champs 4 Mental Health conducted a powerful exercise to demonstrate the concept of taboo (Figure LVI) on International Youth Day. (Figure LVII)



Figure LV - Diabetes Fiji Nursery



Figure LVI - Youth Champs 4 Mental Health Taboo Exercise

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Figure LVII - International Youth Day

On Friday evening, after a day of workshops, there was the opening ceremony for the dispensary. (Figure LVIII)





Figure LVIII - Dispensary Opening Ceremony

This featured a ceremonial cutting off the ribbon by the provincial Minister of Health, followed by songs and a dinner altogether, with dancing and kava for those so-inclined, into the night. We said our farewells to Jimm Tavi, the Think Pacific Build Manager for this project. (Figure LIX)



Figure LIX - Farewell for Jimm (Build Manager)

On Saturday, we had planned to go billi billi rafting but there was a storm and heavy rain so we had a relaxed day inside spending time with our friends and family. (Figure LX)

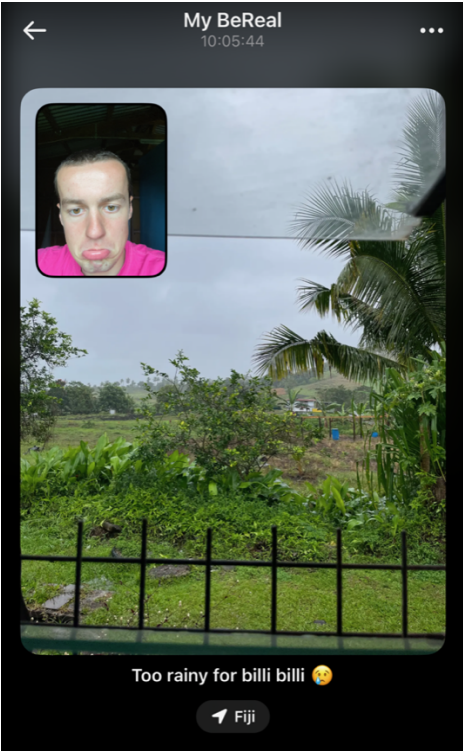


Figure LX - Stormy Weekend

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On Saturday evening, we spent some time making a birthday cake for Isha and Zita's Fijian brother Waisea, who was turning 9 on Sunday. (Figure LXI)

By then, the rain had ended so I then went to Na Moli and Ta Tui's house and had a big Zumba party with Natalie, Cici, Frances and Jone.



Figure LXI - Baking time in the kitchen

On Sunday, we attended church in our home again. Whilst Gerd and Mateo had lunch at Ruhani and Catherine's, I had lunch at home with cousin Viliame's brother and his wife visiting. The wife asked me about King Charles and the British Royal Family, and I had to explain why many

By William Banner, Laidlaw Scholar, Durham University (2023)

young people, including myself, in modern Britain do not like the Royal Family and how we are ashamed of our country's colonialist part extracting resources and abusing people. I felt it was very important for me to have such discussions whilst I was in Fiji, and address my background. On a lighter note, we subsequently celebrated Waisea's birthday party. (Figure LXII)



Figure LXII - Waisea's 9th Birthday Party

Week 5

On Monday 7th August, we resumed our routine of Diabetes workshops and Youth Champs 4 Mental Health in the afternoon. During the Diabetes workshop I ran a Zumba energiser to Sax as volunteered by Semisi (Mizdo). We finished the nursery later that morning, covering with netting. I ran an official Zumba session 5-6.15PM with the Nas, and then at 7.50PM Na, Jone and I went to Moli and Tui's again (I did every night this week) and did even more Zumba (like 2.5 hours in total on this day). I was very happy.

Tuesday was the health screening day for all the community, as well as others brought in by bus from elsewhere in Nalawa Tikina. (Figure LXIII) This was covered in more detail in the Diabetes Fiji overview section. Later that afternoon I played volleyball for two hours.



Figure LXIII - Health Screening Outreach Day

On Wednesday, it was our Na's 45th birthday, and I gave her some gifts I had acquired from the bausa. Then we had our final Youth Champs 4 Mental Health workshop as it was postponed from the afternoon before to extend the outreach day. I had in-depth conversations with Lionel Rogers and Agu Tuinisau about LGBTQ+ in Fiji. Lionel said the Na's all loved me, speaking very positively about my Zumba and how I integrated with all the Fijian culture. However, he said, gay scenes were often censored on Fijian television. Meanwhile, Agu told me about pride sports days in provinces and said progress seemed slow at times but over her lifetime things had definitely improved. Whilst Fiji was the second country in the world after South Africa to explicitly protect against discrimination based on sexual orientation in its constitution in 1997, this was reversed between 2009 and 2013. Currently, conversion therapy is banned, same-sex sexual activity is allowed and at the equal age of consent, and there are anti-discrimination laws. However, same sex marriage, adoption and blood donation are all illegal. Fiji has historically had a minority traditional third gender population (*vakasalewalewa*) but there is no legal right to change gender. Agu told me she thanked all those who came before her, and that whilst people rarely were confrontational, she was sure people would say things behind her back frequently and as such she had had to develop a thick skin.

By William Banner, Laidlaw Scholar, Durham University (2023)

After the workshop had finished, we started choosing groups and brainstorming for the Think Tank and then spent some time decorating the dispensary with the young children, asking them to imprint their hands onto the bottom layer of the walls. (Figure LXIV)



Figure LXIV - Decorating the Dispensary with Children's Handprints

Then in the evening, I returned to Na Moli and Ta Tui's house and we had our clan's first meke practice. I joined Cici and Natalie with all the adults in the Nawayaga clan of Vunimaqo, and later Isha and Zita joined. Mateo and Gerd were absent, so we had to catch them up the next night.

On Thursday, we had the whole day to work on our Think Tank projects. We split into two sub-groups to survey what people wanted in a potential kindergarten/evacuation centre. Isha, Ta Solo and I surveyed the Vunimaqo respondents. More details on survey findings are shown in the appendix of the Dreketi Kindergarten proposal. In the afternoon, Gabi and Bev arranged gaelic football and Irish dancing (a ceilidh), for which I was partnered with Waisea (9). After dinner, Jone and I sang 'You are the Reason' and 'Rise' again before we all went to practise our meke, bringing Mateo and Gerd up to speed.



Figure LXV - Think Tank: Community Build Team

On Friday, the Think Tank was brought to a close with our presentations in front of Cam Watson. (Figure LXV) By this stage we had raised €850, but a few hours later at the Vunimaqo party we excitingly received a €1000 donation from Susanna Kempe, Laidlaw Foundation CEO.

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Auntie Una, Na's sister, arrived from Nausori around midday to stay for the weekend. (Figure LXVI) She bought us a special gift of personalised *daku* fans on behalf of our Na. The Vunimaqo party, started at 7, and we performed our meke for the first time before a lovely dinner of fish and chicken, and lots of train dancing. Most scholars left early at 10 to watch a film but Cici and I stayed and danced for everyone from 10 to 12. (Figure LXVII)



Figure LXVI - Preparing for Party in Vunimaqo



Figure LXVII - Partying until late in Vunimaqo

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Saturday was one of my favourite days of the whole trip. To celebrate the end of our project and the successful completion of its aims, we went to the beach with the whole settlement, including all our families. Unfortunately, our Na stayed behind, as she wanted to spend time with her sister Una. After we left, I learnt our Na went to stay with Una in Nausori for four days, and I had been very aware of the fact that we were being hosted and they were going to great efforts for us, so I helped as much as possible. My phone was out of battery as we had a powercut all of Friday afternoon, so I was able to enjoy the day distraction-free and the photos shown below are courtesy of Izzy and Natalie.

On the bus there, Jone drew a fake tattoo on my arm to match his. (Figure LXXII) When we arrived at the stunning beach, the day started with beach sports – rugby and beach volleyball (with a net fashioned out of bamboo posts). After lunch, we played in the sea with the younger children. Later in the afternoon, we built sandcastles, and Jone wrote my name and his in the sand. We left at 5PM, and the bus back was livened by singing in both Fijian and English. Izzy came around for dinner. The day at the beach is shown in Figure LXVIII, Figure LXIX, Figure LXX and Figure LXXI.



Figure LXVIII - Dreketi Settlement's Beach Day (Sports)



Figure LXIX - Dreketi Settlement's Beach Day (Lunch)



Figure LXX - Fun at the beach



Figure LXXI - Beach Day with Jone and Izzy



Figure LXXII - My Ink Fake Tattoo by Jone

On Sunday, church was cancelled as the pastor could not travel from RakiRaki, and Ta Meli did not lead a service in his place. Instead, we chilled, reading and playing cards and I helped prepare lunch, which we had without Gerd and Mateo. Then we had our Sunday walk to the

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bausa with Moli and Tui's family (as discussed in the culture section). For the second day in a row, I had had one of the best days of the trip. We all continued to hang out long into the evening, playing football in the sunset and doing Zumba in Na Moli and Ta Tui's outdoor area.



Figure LXXIII - Back from Sunday Trip to the Bausa



Figure LXXIV - Sunday Ice Cream

Week 6

On Monday 14th we went billi billi rafting, replacing the weekend excursion we missed due to poor weather. This was a truly special experience, which is a highlight of many visitors to Fiji. We had the privilege of doing it authentically with the young men of the village joining us to

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chop down the bamboo with machetes. They hollowed out the bamboo poles and thread them into each other. We took in turns going on the raft, and swimming alongside it to push it. (Figure LXXVI) We also played in the sand by the riverbanks, taking turns to be buried. (Figure LXXV)



Figure LXXV - Buried in the sand



Figure LXXVI - Billi Billi Rafting

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In the afternoon I paid Mala to cut my hair, with a razor blade. I also had two eyebrow slits to match Jone, and Bev, Gabi and Cici also got eyebrow slits to match. (Figure LXXVII)



Figure LXXVII - Dreketi Haircuts

By William Banner, Laidlaw Scholar, Durham University (2023)

On Monday evening, Isha and Zita arranged a women's night, which was a lovely party with cookies baked by the scholars, dancing, and singing.



Figure LXXVIII - Women's Night

By William Banner, Laidlaw Scholar, Durham University (2023)

Earlier on Monday, I had given my family leaving gifts, plus \$200 for my Na and Ta and \$50 for Jone (I gave a further \$200 to Na and Ta after I left the village using M-Paisa, with which they bought a new phone, \$100 to Tui, and \$100 to Viliame and Jone. I have also been sending some remittance since returning to the UK, as I am in a fortunate position earning money with no unfulfilled needs. I want to give back, to give the people of Dreketi what they deserve).

On Tuesday we had the whole day to ourselves, and as explained earlier in the report, I fulfilled my desire to go to the forest and learn about the Live and Learn water infrastructure project, *inter alia*. (Figure LXXIX) Jone made me a bamboo flute, which he played for me, and then gave to me to take home, something which I will cherish forever, despite it no longer being practical to use after sadly being squished somewhere on the journey back. (Figure LXXX)



Figure LXXIX - Live and Learn Project (Final Day)

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Figure LXXX - Bamboo Flute

Then we played volleyball and other sports and games for the final time all afternoon, before preparing for our final farewell party, which included the *lovo*. (Figure LXXXI)





Figure LXXXI - Ready for Farewell Party

As part of the leaving ceremony, we carried in a long cloth, measuring 1m per visitor to the community, as is tradition. The community sang some very touching leaving songs for us, and Linieta the teacher said some very moving words. (Figure LXXXII)



Figure LXXXII - Farewell Dinner

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The feast of lovo-cooked chicken, fish, taro, cassava, palsami and more was very good and we had vakalolo again as well. After dinner, at 8PM, we went outside and I sat on the make-shift slide with Cici and all my besties from the community, including Jone, Semisi, Emori, Rupeni (all pictured below in Figure LXXXIII) and Obe and Navi.



Figure LXXXIII - Last night with all my besties

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This was followed by a photo shoot by the dispensary (Figure LXXXIV).





Figure LXXXIV - Photo shoot at the Farewell Party

We all went as a group on a walk up the road to Waibaisaga with the musicbox/speaker, and then returned to the festivities which went on long into the night. (Figure LXXXV) Whilst many of the Fijian men were drinking kava, we would dance in trains with the Fijian women. We had lots of nice conversations. There was a special moment when I told Jone I was gay, as I wanted to leave knowing whether I was truly accepted by the community, also feeling inspired by Agu and Lionel telling me that having positive LGBTQ+ role models will help rural communities realise that it is normal to be queer, and that they still deserve love. Jone said that it was fine, that there were plenty of gay people in Fiji, and upon further questioning said that he already knew. I had been wondering whether the Na's knew or suspected it, through the Zumba or otherwise, but my Na had once made a joke about marrying a Fijian woman to stay in Fiji. I believe that the middle aged operate a more heteronormative assumptions model, don't ask approach. I think it would have been viewed even more harshly by the chief and village elders, but the youth seemed to be liberal and accepting, with access to TikTok and other external influences not around in the past.



Figure LXXXV - Final Night in Dreketi Settlement

I was the last scholar to stay up, and went to bed at 3.30AM.

On the last morning, I woke up at 6.50AM. At 8AM, we had our final breakfast, and Viliame read out a farewell message to us, written by the family, which brought me to tears. (Figure LXXXVI)

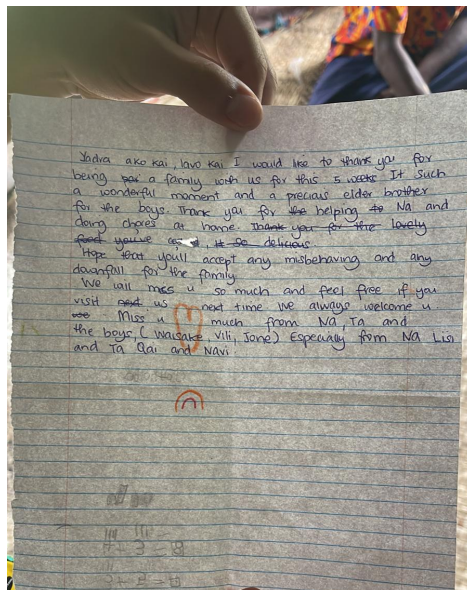


Figure LXXXVI - Farewell Letter

The line asking for forgiveness for any wrongdoings is a common feature in Fijian speeches, and something we heard on multiple occasions. This was unnecessary but shows humility, which is a

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good trait to have as a leader. We were then presented with our final garlands, with our personalised *daku* fans tied to them. After photos with our family (Figure LXXXVII), at 8.45AM we left the house (Figure LXXXVIII) for the final time.



Figure LXXXVII - Last morning with our host family



Figure LXXXVIII - The Namovi Household

We then sat in the Community Shed with everyone for the last time, and at 9.30 the bus arrived so we said our first round of heartfelt goodbyes before moving over to where the bus was. Jone was waiting there with my yellow tote bag, always watching out for me. Then we spent the next half an hour saying goodbye to absolutely everyone, exchanging blessings. (Figure LXXXIX) The Fijians were not afraid to express their emotions, and I align with this. I think as a leader it is important to be emotionally intelligent and express your true emotions, whilst understanding how your emotions affect your thinking, rather than try to shy away from them altogether and act neutrally, appearing hard to read, as many leaders in the past were encouraged to do so.



Figure LXXXIX - Vunimaqo Besties (BFFs Forever)



Figure XC - Farewell Song

At 10AM, they started singing us the traditional farewell song again, as they did the night before. (Figure XC) Then, I was surprised to be asked for 'one last Zumba'. All cried out, I prepared to do this, and was then surprised again when they no one joined in, so it became a dance solo. As such, I felt initially awkward, representing our whole group's final goodbye and having to match their farewell songs, but I rose to the occasion and danced to Power by Little Mix. Everyone recorded on their phones, and it was posted on Facebook with a heartfelt tribute to our visit.¹⁶ (Figure XCI) I thought it felt a bit like a music video, dancing in front of the bus.

¹⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/100026101596727/video/283450794325634/>



Figure XCI - Facebook Post of My Final Dance







Figure XCII - Last Dance in Dreketi

We then said our final, final goodbyes before departing at 10.20AM.



 **Amai Charlotte** 20 h · 🌐

It's a time to say hello.....
It's a time to say goodbye 🙋
Ni sa vaka gauna na kecega!!!!
Safe trips everyone
Thanks for your time we share at Yastee state!!!!
Mr William from England
Mr Ratu from Peru
Miss Vilisi from England
And Miss Sisi from Beijing
[#vote_city](#)
[#mexicandoo](#)
[#yastee_state](#)



 You, Taxman Vuto and 29 others

Figure XCIII - Being Waved Off

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On the way back, we stopped in Suva for lunch and we bought matching friendship necklaces.
(Figure XCIV)



Figure XCIV - Matching Friendship Necklaces

We then arrived in Sigatoka late at night.

The rest of the week was pretty relaxed and gave us time to reflect on our experience and how we had grown as people. (Figure XCV) We sadly had to say goodbye to the three Cornell scholars after one night in Sigatoka. (Figure XCVI) On Gabi's birthday, we went to the Sigatoka sand dunes. (Figure XCVII)

After staying four nights in Sigatoka, we moved to Nadi for the last night. On the final day, I made the trip a full-circle moment by meeting up with my friend Imeri, who I met in London at Heathrow, in Nadi. I took Gabi and Bev with me and we had a lovely day relaying our experiences to her, and she was impressed by how much we had integrated into the Fijian iTaukei culture. She gave me a gift of a blue bula shirt. Later that evening, Imeri came to the airport, five minutes from her home, to wave me off. This was a really fitting end to the trip. (Figure XCVIII)





Figure XCV - Staying in Sigatoka



Figure XCVI - Saying Goodbye to the Cornell Scholars



Figure XCVII - Sigatoka Sand Dunes



Figure XCVIII - Goodbye from Imeri at Nadi Airport

General Points and Unanswered Questions

I learnt so much during my five weeks in the community, and six weeks overall in Fiji. However, I am aware that our experience in the settlement is not fully representative of their normal lives. Whilst they are genuinely happy people in general, they face a lot of hardship which we only learnt snippets about. Some observations and questions I noted include:

- Everyone had borne the pain of Cyclone Winston long after it happened, and were visibly moved during our Think Tank when we brought it up.
- Salote's father struggled as a widower, three years on from losing his wife. Few of the scholars would even notice his presence as a single father.
- Na said how she had been ill after the death of her daughter, but in a way that suggested mental illness, struggling to cope with bereavement. At this time she gave away one of the children to go to RakiRaki and live with a relative. I can't imagine how tough a decision this must have been, but Viliame and Jone would have been old

enough to help her (16 and 14 respectively), and Waisake would have only been three years old.

- I did not get to speak to Jone and Viliame directly about how they felt about the loss of their elder sister. Viliame did joke 'if I'm around in a year' and didn't have any long-term plans.
- Another woman in her thirties had lost her husband.
- A couple of the children in the village were missing parents, including Rupeni (15) who had lost his father to a heart attack a couple of years ago. This highlights the prevalence of NCDs, and the life expectancy for Fijian men is just 67 years.
- One house in Waisava was abandoned after a woman ran away from her husband, and took the children with her. Now it is used as a 'boys house' to hang out and smoke suki/drink kava, and chat.
- As mentioned previously, every day a decision had to be made about whether to attend school or help on the farm. They valued education, but needed to first help their family survive.
- Viliame told me he just wanted to impress his parents with his rugby etc., and that was the first insight into this aspect of parental relations I had seen.
- Both Waisake and Salote were six years old, but whilst Waisake acted innocently, his niece Salote was able to be more independent, as my Na told me, which is indicative of both the role of women in Fijian society from a very young age, and also highlights how Salote would have grown up so fast after losing her Na. On one occasion Salote quite darkly, and bluntly as children do, told me how people die. The pain was evident, but also somewhat normalised, as if people had become numb to the pain. Everyone was highly religious and sought support from God during tough times.
- We were only there for five weeks and my Na was very forthcoming, telling me about their lives, but I am sure some problems were being swept under the mat. I do not think they were insincerely happy, but every family had experienced tragedy which may have made them become seemingly numb to certain negative experiences. They also were

incredibly grateful for life and the blessings they had, rather than focusing on negatives, which is something we can all learn.

- Na Moli told me Na Lu liked me helping because she is in a house with just men, and Salote only stays half the time. Na Lu and Na Lisi made a great team.
- Early on, I learnt that Uncle Wais and Ta Meli's brother and his wife had died in an electrical fire in Australia, and I shared about my father and sister's housefire in the UK this year, an unusual thing to relate to.
- We had some issues with Think Pacific not paying adequate wages to the builders, and not paying Na Una and Ta Rupeni the full payment for Richita after she left (they paid \$100 instead of \$600).
- I heard of seven or eight people with relatives in the British army whilst I was in Fiji. This was insightful and invoked questions about the legacy of colonialism – which as I mentioned before – I had to explain why we are ashamed of our history in the UK today.
- Things have changed a bit after we have left: the men, including Tui, Semisi, Marika and Kaci, spend the weekdays in RakiRaki to cut sugar cane (*suka*) for an income. Navi doesn't go to school much at all as it is just him and Ta Wais on the farm. Jone was sent for a few days to Nausori to help Auntie Una who lives alone (her son works in Nadi airport). Whilst most of the men cutting sugar cane are single young men, Tui had to leave his wife Moli, his young daughter Frances, and their baby alone in Vunimaqo during the week. This is sad, but the women work together as a community and are very strong.

I also experienced an overwhelming deal of kindness, which I seek to learn from and pay forward. I remember the squeal of excitement from Jone when I first arrived at the house with Uncle Wais (ahead of the others) and he and Navi were staring at me as I sat cross-legged on the floor. I received great kindness from my Na, as well as Moli and all the women in the village. Throughout the trip Jone was always very thoughtful and protective of me as his brother, just as Viliame was to Waisake. He made me the bamboo flute, spearfished fish for us to eat, brought me a pumpkin and potato curry filled roti after billi billi, stood next to me rather than opposite whilst we did Zumba, wrote our names in the sand at the beach, sung 'You are the

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Reason' and 'Rise' with me, and would always look after my coat or bags. Along with Cici, from Beijing but attending Cornell University in New York, we formed the 'Vunimaqo Besties'. I have the comfort of knowing that I have friends all over the world, and this shared knowledge gives us all strength. Just as Lionel said, in Fiji it was common for many people to love you, and Fijian culture prioritises family, community, and helping each other more than any other culture I have experienced.

Leadership Learnings

I grew so much as a leader, and person, during my time in Fiji. I learnt about patience, being myself and expressing my true values, and waiting to emerge in ways I lead, for example by teaching Zumba. I think it is really important to listen and speak to as many people as possible, forming connections and expanding our knowledge and mindset. This applies to anyone of any age and demographic, as you never know where it might lead and what connections you might form. This is illustrated by how I met Imeri, and I was friends with anyone from young children such as Salote and Frances, to people much older than me. Every age group has experienced a different lifepath, and has lessons for us to learn. We need diversity in the workplace in respect to all backgrounds. Before leaving for Fiji, I had been reanalysing the depressing statistics about the last of women and people from minority backgrounds in Economics. I have worked with an education charity in the past, BubbleBubble Economics, as well as working with the Laidlaw Schools Trust. I am passionate about education and want to do more work in this field going forward to drive change.

I also learnt the importance of delegation to avoid being overwhelmed. It is important to relinquish control and focus on a policy of specialisation and division of labour, playing to everyone's strengths. I am also an optimist, and prefer a carrot to a stick. My leadership style aligns with this, and I will always motivate people with rewards rather than punishment. Happier people work better, and we will achieve our common goals better. Life is too short to not be happy. This is just like how the people of Dreketi were incredibly grateful for life and the blessings they had, rather than focusing on the negative, which is something we can all learn.

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Leadership is also about being inquisitive and observant and seeing the bigger picture, and being empathetic. Critical thinking skills can take years to acquire but by being analytical and thinking before speaking or writing allows us to develop our thoughts further. At the core of society, we want to meet as many people's needs as possible without compromising the needs of others or producing what we call in Economics 'negative externalities' on third parties, or things we all have a common stakehold in, such as the environment. Sustainability, as defined by the UN Brandt Commission, means to meet the needs of today without compromising the needs of the future.

I believe in being ambitious, bold and determined, three of the Laidlaw values. We need to have *conversations* with as many people as possible – *the art of transformative dialogue* – as evidenced by the kindergarten project idea stemming from conversations I had with our Na. Some scholars were questioning about what we were doing and the ethics of volunteering, but without asking what the stakeholders, the community themselves, wanted and needed. I think trying our best to help, and aiming to make our help sustainable in the long-run is what we should focus on. I also believe it is better to help a small community thoroughly then to help lots of people a little but then leaving them stuck with more to be done. It is best to empower people to help themselves, and to build them up.

Fundamentally, I agree with the Laidlaw slogan to be a 'change maker, not change talker', and everything I have done aligns with the principles of my true goals, and what I think will help people, changing the world in little ways every day.

Leadership requires collaboration, partnering with a diverse body of voices who each have their own backgrounds and specialisms, which can contribute to achieving larger goals than could be done individually, producing synergies.

Sustained Impact

As mentioned throughout this document, our project is going to have a – hopefully significant – sustained impact. Not only will the health centre serve the community for years to come, we

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are working on our ambitious kindergarten project, and taking significant steps every week to achieve our long-term goals. This is covered in more details in the separate Dreketi Kindergarten proposal linked previously, but as of the end of September 2023, we are currently at the stage of reaching out to build NGOs, the Ministry of Education, and some contacts given to us by the co-founders of Think Pacific (Simon Darker and Harry Hunter):

1. Early Childhood Education officer at the Ministry of Education (under the new Permanent Secretary)
2. The Asset Management Unit of the Ministry of Education
3. The National Disaster Management Office (NDMO)
4. Child Benefit Fiji
5. The Ra Provincial Office of the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs

I am also going into Laidlaw Schools Trust managed kindergartens to learn from them, and their pedagogy techniques, which often involve play-based learning.

Section 2: Global Citizenship and Ethical Leadership

My Style of Leadership

As explained in my leadership learnings from the LiA, I believe in building people up and empowering them, rather than being a step ahead. That involves taking time to ask people what they need help with.

I am a quiet, analytical leader and will carefully observe problems and break them down into smaller, solvable chunks. I am a self-starter, believing in driving change ourselves rather than complaining about the state of the world all the whilst sitting still and not doing anything to actively change it ourselves.

I believe in the importance of collaboration and perspective. It is important to know how to communicate to different people and adapt to suit working with them and achieving the best goals. For me, I know I prefer praise to being unconstructively criticised as a form of motivation. Having conversations can transform your perspective on a topic and give you new ideas about

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how to approach a task or project, and also introduce you to inspiring new connections who can help you and you can help back. This became apparent to me after I found out about the Laidlaw Scholarship through Saskia Poulter, who I had done an internship with previously.

I think it is important to be self-aware, for instance, I have always believed in the theory of marginal improvement and thinking about small changes I can make to achieve better outcomes. Whilst I still believe there is some power to this, I believe in the need for compassion, being kind to both ourselves and others. As I said before, I have cycles of success based on praise, not criticism. So if my internal voice is a hater, and I am ever self-critical and unsatisfied with my efforts, then I will not have the mindset to achieve other successes. I can control my own narrative, and be a positive, enthusiastic spirit, as those are the kinds of people I myself like to be around. We can only try our bests given many bounded constraints in life, and I think accepting this and being aware of our own limitations is essential, because it means we can work on our weaknesses, and also work with people for whom they are a strength, in order to succeed as a team. I used to procrastinate certain things due to perfectionism, or wanting to be comprehensive (like in this document, further evidence that this is something I am still working on), but it is better to acknowledge constraints and learn to prioritise effectively, since there are only so many hours in a day.

I have always been an ambitious leader, and this is reflected in my belief to aim high, and ‘reach for the stars, because if you fall short, you will still have achieved brilliance’. Determination comes into play when I make plans to achieve my goals at, nearly, any cost. This is done by breaking down tasks into actionable steps, sharing workload with colleagues, and building in contingency time to project management. Being brave and bold, and courageous, other Laidlaw values, I have learnt from my Fijian friends about. It is important to take the leap of faith, put myself out of my comfort zone, and always try new things.

Ethical Leadership

For me, being an ethical leader is not only about helping with things sustainably as I have expressed previously, but by considering the responsibility I have as a citizen, a leader and a role model to some – often youth – sometimes without realising. I am JCR Vice President in my

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college and as such I am very visible. I try to hold myself to standards that I would like to expect from others, e.g. helping someone when I see them in need. Everything I do needs to consider external influence, and not just be a private benefit-cost maximisation exercise. I also have a duty to inspire other people to follow their dreams and advocate for positive change, helping them where I can with connections or knowledge about job opportunities, for example. We are all on our own paths, and life is too short to see other people as competition or threats, which the current economic system and society can sometimes frame it as.

Being a Global Citizen

I have been fortunate enough to go to the other side of the world and back during my time as a Laidlaw Scholar. I believe in embracing and learning from every culture I encounter, and immerse myself in their literature, dance, lifestyles and learn about anything that is important to them. I would argue that, anthropologically, cultures have more in common than they have as differences. For example, friendship and community appears in every society, just in different forms.

It also requires us to realise that our actions have global effects, for instance, the effects of climate change were felt not in countries that are high emitters, but in countries like Fiji, evidenced by Cyclone Winston. Hence, we have a duty to help reverse the damage we have caused.

My Values:

Ambitious – As I said when I first applied to the Laidlaw Foundation, I believe in subverting norms, not doing anything one way, just because that is the way it has always been done. I am also keen to find solutions, and challenge myself, as evidenced by our Dreketi Kindergarten Project.

Brave – I am bold, looking for innovative ways of doing things, I want to learn from failures, but be willing to try out new methods and revise and adapt as needed.

By William Banner, Laidlaw Scholar, Durham University (2023)

Curious – I want to push the boundaries of what is possible, be the first to do something a new way. I am eager to learn from all people I encounter, from a huge array of backgrounds.

Determined – I am always determined to reach my ambitious goals and take steps to achieve the aims. I want to remain focused on my core purpose, remain committed and resilient, getting back up after I have hit hurdles and finding a new path to the finish line.

Extraordinary – I am unique, and celebrate my differences. I am multi-faceted, being an environmental economist using experimental economic techniques one minute, and leading a Zumba class the next. I want to teach to share my abilities with others.

Fast – I want to work on projects quickly as there are people whose lives can benefit from the project, and they deserve their needs to be met. There are many wrongs to right in the world and by intervening with injustice and hate when it first arises, we can nip it in the bud.

Good – Everything I do I must consider the consequences of my actions, and only act in a way that is purposeful and will help other people too. I must follow my heart and my gut instinct, and then use my brain to plan the steps to get there. This has been proven this Summer, with my passion and desire to do the right thing in establishing a Kindergarten/Evacuation Centre in Dreketi Settlement, but rather than just talking about the change, we are driving the change by taking the actionable steps to get there, and we are well on the way to achieving the dream. I will remain resilient, and I can not wait for the day we can update the Laidlaw Scholars Network with Dreketi Kindergarten's official opening.