

LiA Weekly Blogs: Week 1

What went well?

The progress I made; what was achieved and done

The seed of traveling to Fiji was planted in my heart way back, while watching the film *The Truman Show* when I was in primary school. As Truman points towards this islanded country in the middle of the vast southern Pacific Ocean on the map and describes how eager he wants to visit there, I was deeply intrigued. Thereafter, going to Fiji was on my bucket list that I never forget over the years. You can imagine how excited I was when I received the email from Think Pacific informing me that I would spend six weeks participating in the Community and Youth Project in a Fijian village. People might stereotypically equate Fiji as a tropical vacation paradise with blue waters, white sand, and coconut trees. As a sociology major student, I wanted to dive underneath the surface level and explore how locals go about their everyday lives. This six-week immersive experience is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for me to sneak peak inside these stereotypes.



Upon arriving at the Nadi International Airport on July 9th, all travelers were greeted with a beautiful welcome song from local musicians playing ukuleles and guitars, which made me feel Fiji's hospitality right away. In the resort, I met fifteen other Laidlaw scholars from different universities around the world and three Think Pacific project leaders, with whom I will be embarking on the journey together. Everyone began to make casual chats, and we soon got to know each other spontaneously. From Monday to Thursday, we were given time to adapt to the new environment, get to know each other and prepare ourselves for the upcoming village life. During the briefing, we listened to Think Pacific coordinators introducing the TP organization, reminding us about the health and support we could access, and detailing the specifics of living in the village. The build manager explained the building tools we would use in order to build the medical dispensary, the specifications, and the stages

Waisava and the Vunimaqo side, while scholars introduced their family members to everyone. Various sports and games took place in the open space near the shed in the afternoon. We played volleyball, touchdown rugby with the teens, and nursery games with the children. Through this opportunity, I got to know these children from the settlement much more and really bonded with some. On Sunday, we changed to Fiji-style formal wear: girls in bula dresses and boys in shirts and pocket sulu for church service. Although preaching was in Fijian and I didn't understand, learning and singing the hymns together with the children was the best part.



What could have been done differently?

Things that did not get done and/or could be changed

Although most scholars knew each other through casual individual or small group chats, it would work better if there were more scheduled ice-breakers for the scholars as a collective to get to know each other, about their studies, hobbies, and their Laidlaw research. Since each of us has different personalities and methods of approaching new people, a collective meet-and-greet session will give everyone a voice and shine a light on fun facts that people didn't spot on.

Since everyone was paired up with one or two scholars as roommates for the rest of the five weeks in the village, it would also be more helpful if the pairing arrangement was disclosed to us as soon as possible so that we could have more time to make a conscious effort to know our roommates better.

For the briefings, Think Pacific should share with us more details about the village, not only the name and location, but also the number of people and families in the settlement, demographics, etc. For instance, we were not informed that the settlement was impacted by Cyclone Winston in 2015. If more in-depth surveying had been done previously and the information had been provided, we would have been more aware and prepared when related conversations were brought up within our families. Moreover, the collaborating organizations should provide us with more information about our roles in building the medical dispensary, participating in Diabetes Fiji's Health Screening Day, and joining YC4MH's mental health workshops. Without in-depth knowledge of related areas and with limited internet, we could only lead with common knowledge that we know within our small groups and run duties that seem

replaceable by any others.

What did I learn about myself when working with others?

Contributions, behaviours and values

During the adaptation and preparation days, I prepared myself with an open mindset and a proactive attitude in adapting to the new environment and getting to know new people of different backgrounds. Since we would become teammates, socializing and bonding benefited the larger group cohesion and helped us understand each scholar's values, background, and working style. Moreover, talking to other Laidlaw scholars opened me up to diverse cultures and inspired me to reflect on my background, past experience, and life goals.

What did I learn about leadership?

Leadership attributes and insights I developed

Collaboration and teamwork – Builds relationships and networks

Getting to know fellow Laidlaw scholars and learning more about each other's characteristics, working style, and background ensure that we develop stronger relationships, understand each other, support each other's back, and play to one another's strengths. This helps to establish a strong foundation to build a dream team. The bond that we have formed and developed throughout the journey proves to be essential for facilitating teamwork in building the nursery, participating in Diabetes Fiji's workshops and health screening day, joining YC4MH's workshops, and organizing the Think Tank.

Leadership abilities – Cultural intelligence and capacity for empathy

During the Youth Champs 4 Mental Health briefing, what Lionel, the president of the organization, said really resonated with me. He talked about how big, international organizations, such as the Red Cross, come into Fijian communities with large sums of money and use complicated terms to talk about their visions. However, local Fijians fail to understand due to language barriers and limited prior knowledge of mental health. They still suffer from day-to-day anxieties, depression, and even suicidal intentions. In order to become leaders who bring real impact to the communities and lead effectively, we need to adopt a culturally sensitive approach, spending time and effort to research and survey what the target audience/community really needs and what works best for them.

What do I want to develop or focus on next?

What I still need to develop?

Since our village life has just come to a start, my next step will be getting to know my family, familiarizing myself with the village setting, and adapting to the living conditions. The living conditions here are very different from the city life that I'm used to. Now, I'm living in a big family with seven siblings, helping my na to cook with kerosene and wood, sitting on the floor cross-legged most of the time, and taking cold showers. Nevertheless, I'm eager to explore more about my family's way of living and learn about their everyday wisdom.

Within the first three days of entering the settlement, everything surrounding me every minute felt brand new. Rather than feeling overwhelmed, I'm embracing all the new changes with the support of my lovely host family, and I feel ready with an open mindset to observe, learn, and experience everything.