

SCEFI EMBLEMATIC STORIES

Abua Youth Club:

Change through community mobilisation



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Strengthening
Citizen Engagement
in Fiji Initiative



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The series of emblematic stories under the Strengthening Citizen Engagement in Fiji Initiative (SCEFI) were developed in collaboration with the relevant civil society organisations, with contributions from:

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Abua Youth Club:

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SUMMARY

Many urban communities in Fiji face challenges associated with migration and poverty, including inequalities in access to basic services and opportunities. Efforts of partnerships between policy makers and communities to find creative and sustainable solutions in these situations are required. In 2014, the Abua Youth Club, with support from UNDP's Strengthening Citizen Engagement in Fiji Initiative (SCEFI), organized a training programme for the residents of Abua, an informal settlement in the outskirts of Labasa, Macuata Province. The training was geared towards developing skills and capacities to address challenges specific to the Abua community. The planning and implementation of the programme was community-driven and participatory, involving both women and youth. The initiative succeeded in gaining the attention of social service agents, expanded Abua's networks with others, and opened up opportunities for community members in a manner not known before.

INTRODUCTION

Creative and innovative approaches are urgently needed to enhance community resilience and planning capacities of the urban poor in Fiji. The myriad challenges of the urban poor include high living costs, lack of public services, threats of expulsion due to illegal land settlement, and limited employment opportunities for those who migrate from rural areas due to the non-transference of farming skills in urban settings. Abua is characteristic of many marginalised communities in squatter settlements who face tremendous financial and social hardships. The settlement comprises of 60 homes of mainly Indo-Fijian families whose incomes are insufficient to meet even basic needs.



Photo Credit: UNDP



Photo Credit: UNDP

Although the community in Abua had been unable to attract the attention of service providers in the past, this changed in 2014 when the Abua Youth Club was awarded a grant from UNDP's Strengthening Citizen Engagement in Fiji Initiative (SCEFI). The Club was also formed in 2014 by three community members to foster greater participation of young people in efforts towards improving community well-being. Its formation was supported by the elder males of the community and the Abua Sanatan Dharam Ramayan Mandali, the community's governing body of religious and cultural affairs. The Club's core group of 27 women (of which 17 are young women) and 10 young men organizes its meetings and workshops according to the needs of the community.

PROCESS: INCLUSIVE PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION

The Abua Youth Club developed a project proposal with the assistance of a SCEFI facilitator for a training programme to address the many challenges the community faced. When the Club was initially created, its founders undertook a scoping exercise of the community which highlighted a number of priority issues. These included fire safety, safety of children from drowning (since a river runs alongside the settlement and its lower part is prone to flooding), needs of young women and girls in the community, and the preservation of their culture and heritage. The funds from SCEFI were intended for a training programme to respond to these priorities. The training therefore included the following activities:

- ▶ training in fire prevention, rescue and first aid.
- ▶ swimming lessons for children.
- ▶ raising awareness through information on domestic and child abuse and teenage pregnancies.
- ▶ training adolescents and children in cultural dances and songs, including playing musical instruments.

Once a grant of FJD 8,500 (approximately USD 4,250) was approved, two organizers from the Club attended a three-day induction workshop by SCEFI during which they were trained in skills on citizen engagement and problem-solving (see Box 1). SCEFI's training helped the Club representatives develop a broader understanding and appreciation of their roles. They understood that the SCEFI funds could be leveraged for not only conducting a community training programme, but also for facilitating broader engagement with community members.

BOX 1. How SCEFI Supports Civic Engagement in Local Communities

UNDP's Strengthening Citizen Engagement in Fiji Initiative (SCEFI) is a three year project (2013-2016) aimed at strengthening peaceful and inclusive development in Fiji by enabling citizens to engage in community activities. It emphasises fostering democracy from the bottom up, and as such, the strengthening of collaboration between decision-makers and citizens. SCEFI is organized around six core themes: transformative leadership, non-discrimination and inclusiveness, equitable service delivery, accountability and human rights, voice and choice, decision making and coalition building.

SCEFI's outreach strategy involved receiving proposals and funding projects of civic engagement across Fiji. Towards this objective, it recruited and trained 11 local facilitators who visited Fiji's 14 provinces and conducted 236 information sessions that reached over 3,000 people in 2014. SCEFI facilitators were critical to realizing the Initiative's aim of targeting far-flung communities and citizens groups, and identifying emblematic projects which represented empowerment, self-help and collaborative action.

Through the outreach effort, 88 project proposals in total were submitted for consideration. Facilitators also helped organizations to prepare grant proposals. Once the grant proposals were approved, representatives of each organization attended a three-day training workshop where grantees were informed about SCEFI's overall objectives and provided support on management and reporting requirements. The training provided skill-building and information on key concepts such as civic engagement and strengthening collaboration between government and civil society. Facilitators also provided mentoring and facilitation support to grantees during project implementation, and assisted with reporting and financial requirements.

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Upon their return, the Club convened a meeting with different governmental authorities and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to inform them of the grant from SCEFI and solicit support. A programme of events was decided for the training, based on the needs of the community as well as on the support offered by the Ministry of Youth, Ministry of Women and NGO groups.

During the planning process, alongside club organisers and community elders, women and youth members actively provided their inputs. It was the first time the community formed a registered group that provided space for both women and the youth to talk about issues that concerned them, and where potential solutions were discussed with the community at large. Three core organizers from the Club visited the 60 households in the community to inform them about the training programme. Meetings were also held thereafter to discuss and confirm the needs of community members.

The following components comprised the training programme for Abua community members:

- ▶ A 5-day sewing workshop for women and girls
- ▶ Three hours of daily music lessons for 5 days, which included one for young adults and one for children
- ▶ Classical Indo-Fijian dance classes for 8 young women 3 hours per day for 5 days
- ▶ A two day workshop in tie dying, stenciling and making tote bags for 17 stay-at-home mothers and young women
- ▶ A one day mat weaving class for 17 women and girls
- ▶ A one day workshop on party decoration techniques for 17 women and girls
- ▶ A one day workshop on floral arrangements for 17 women and girls



Photo Credit: UNDP

RESULTS AND IMPACT

Implementing the training programme brought recognition to the Club within the community as a youth organization committed to improve the lives in Abua. It also benefitted the Youth Club members and the larger community in significant ways.

- ▶ New learning through the SCEFI induction workshop: The Youth Club members who participated in SCEFI's induction workshop gained skills on how to better articulate community issues, new ways of problem-solving, and developed confidence in their roles. They also shared their knowledge and skills with their community, such as those on conflict resolution.
- ▶ Improved gender relations: The Club's inclusive approach towards women helped reshape attitudes of men in the community towards women. According to community leaders, the training programme

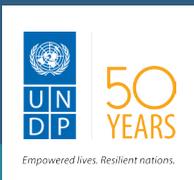
highlighted specific challenges facing women that had never been discussed before. This opened the way for adult males/husbands to show more respect to their spouses and other women and girls in the community. Many men now encourage women and youth to speak out at meetings. If this change continues over time, it may represent a cultural shift in attitudes and behaviors towards women and young people in Abua.

- ▶ Recognition from social service agents: Because of its proactive approach towards civic action, the Abua community and the Abua Youth Club are now in the radar of social service agents like the Provincial Office, the Red Cross, the Fire Rescue Service, the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre and the Ministry of Women and Social Welfare Office. The Fiji Women's Crisis Centre, for example, is in touch with community leaders over how their programmes can have relevance for women and young girls in the community. The Fiji Red Cross office has been working with the community and the SCEFI Facilitator, particularly post tropical cyclone Winston, to assess how Abua could be included in its Disaster Risk Management & Resilience Programme.
- ▶ Increased credibility with partners: After the training programme, the Abua Youth Club was increasingly seen as a go-between partner between Abua and government agencies and NGOs to enable delivery of services.
- ▶ Improved livelihoods and access to employment: As a result of the practical skills acquired through the training, some women continued to work together post-training and sell their products in the community and to friends outside.

LESSONS LEARNED

- ▶ In Fiji, unequal power relationships between men and women, youth and older men, based on traditional religious and cultural beliefs, go largely unquestioned. The Abua case demonstrates that increased awareness can occur among elders about the importance of inclusive decision-making, and encourage a cultural shift in thinking at a community level.
- ▶ The innovative approach of the Abua Youth Club involved community-driven processes, with government and social service providers playing a supportive role as partners. As communities and governments struggle to find creative and durable solutions to the challenges of urbanization, its approach offers insights on how to promote holistic human development through effective stakeholder engagement.





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