

SCEFI EMBLEMATIC STORIES

Viseisei Sai Health Centre:

Empowering teen mothers in Vuda District



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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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Viseisei Sai Health Centre:

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SUMMARY

The issue of teenage pregnancies in Fiji is rarely discussed in community forums, even as the Health Ministry acknowledges that teenage pregnancies are on the rise. Young single mothers are vulnerable to poverty and social exclusion. Sound public policies on sexual and reproductive health which target young people are a matter of critical importance. In 2014 with assistance from UNDP's Strengthening Citizen Engagement in Fiji Initiative (SCEFI), community health workers from the Viseisei Sai Health Centre in Ba province initiated a project to empower 33 single mothers with information and skill building in two villages of Vuda district. All mothers who participated in the initiative were unemployed. Using a holistic approach that included engagement of several stakeholders, including government ministries, the project imparted life-changing information to teen mothers, helped them form support groups, and open up possibilities for concerted action towards their welfare.

INTRODUCTION

While adolescent fertility rates are very high in Pacific Island countries, young people do not have adequate access to information and services on sexual and reproductive health. Investing in adolescent girls and young women's health is of critical importance to prevent teenage pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections. Interventions to encourage girls to stay in schools and equipping them with information about safe options are equally important. Studies in Fiji confirm that teenage pregnancies are often unplanned and unintended, and the stigma associated with teenage pregnancies work against them seeking health information and care, including emergency contraception and therapeutic counselling.

The Viseisei Sai Health Centre (VSHC) is a registered charity established in 2011 to provide free health care and development services to the Viseisei community in Vuda district. VSHC leaders who implement projects on sexual and reproductive health have intimate knowledge about the sexual and reproductive health status in Fiji's western division.

During 2011-2014, VSHC conducted numerous consultations in Vuda district to identify community health problems. Through these consultations, its Community Health Workers (CHWs) identified teen pregnancy as an issue of concern in the district. Through the dialogue process they initiated in the district, CHWs learned that teen mothers were a socially stigmatized group who faced a number of serious social and health-related problems. Once a single teenager became pregnant she was likely become dependent on her relatives for survival and drop out of school without completing her education. The dependency on others was often accompanied by mistreatment and stigma, resulting

in low self-esteem and depression. Teenage/single mothers were also usually disengaged from society and left out from any decision making processes within their families and communities. Thus a cycle of disempowerment surrounded these women and their children.

In 2014, VSHC successfully obtained funds from UNDP's Strengthening Citizen Engagement in Fiji Initiative (SCEFI) to initiate an empowerment project for teen mothers in Vuda. SCEFI aided the CHWs from VSHC in developing their proposal, linking VSHC's objectives to SCEFI priority themes (see Box 1).



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.

The project targeted mothers in two villages of Vuda district, all of who were unemployed and suffered from social and health ills. The SCEFI-supported project was the first effort of its kind in the district to assist teen mothers. It aimed at empowering teenage/single mothers through information to help them make informed decisions regarding their reproductive health, and increase their chances of finding employment through skill-building and information.

PROCESS: SUPPORT FROM A BROAD NETWORK OF STAKEHOLDERS

The project was undertaken over a six month period from February-July 2015. As a first step, VSHC identified 33 teenage mothers in Viseisei and Lauwaki villages, and with their permission, conducted an in-depth assessment through a questionnaire of their needs and challenges. The questionnaires were completed by 20 out of 33 single mothers. The survey revealed that most of the young women saw their lives as having very limited opportunities for personal or financial growth, although they expressed the desire to pursue their life goals whether it was continuing education or finding employment. The women considered economic independence as their single most important objective, and a critical first step in regaining respect of their families and their communities.

In order to design a holistic intervention, VSHC convened a meeting with relevant stakeholders including the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Women, Social Welfare and Poverty Alleviation, civil society groups and non-government organizations. At the meeting various ministries and civil society organizations volunteered to contribute their services to the women. Line ministries including the Ministry of Health, Ministry of

Youth and Sport and Ministry of Women and Social Welfare were to be notified of the progress throughout the implementation of the project. It was agreed that VSHC leaders would guide the implementation process since they had strong working relationship with major stakeholders. It was also agreed that the CHWs who developed the SCEFI grant proposal take a leadership role in implementing the initiative.

The CHWs and VSHC leaders developed an intervention plan to assist the teenage/single mothers based on information from the in-depth survey and the stakeholder planning meeting. The intervention strategies were:

- ▶ counseling and referral services facilitated by Empower Pacific
- ▶ financial literacy programme conducted by the Consumer Council of Fiji
- ▶ skills training facilitated by the Ministries of Women, and Youth and Sports
- ▶ life skills training programme, where the Ministry of Health (Adolescent Health Development Unit) and the Reproductive and Family Health Association of Fiji were invited to undertake sessions
- ▶ a micro finance education effort conducted by the National Center for Micro Enterprise and Development and Empower Pacific IGP Department.

Through these programmes the various stakeholders provided skills, information, and created links with teen mothers. The women were also encouraged to form support groups to help each other's personal efforts, take leadership over their own development, and engage with the stakeholders on required services and support.

The design of the initiative followed a “bottom-up approach” with the needs of the target community as the central organizing principle. VSHC acted as a conduit between the community and the stakeholders. The implementation of the project was done through the traditional structure of the vanua and the full involvement of the village council’s health committee.

VHSC also organized three workshops to discuss issues such as responsibilities, ownership, support for partners, dealing with family conflicts and conflict resolution. A total of 16 mothers attended all or some of the workshops. Out of 16 mothers, 8 of them completed the full programme.



Photo Credit: Viseisei Sai Health Centre

RESULTS AND IMPACT

The overall medium/long-term impact of the intervention has not yet been formally evaluated by VSHC. However, workshop evaluations and discussions with the project implementers suggest the following results and impacts:

- ▶ Empowerment through acquiring knowledge and skills: Individuals who participated in the workshops reported that they were now better equipped with critical information, including learning about different government agencies and the assistance they provide. One participant reported she felt more confident to talk to her peers and her community about being a mother and the lessons she has learnt, and that she has helped three other young mothers to take ownership of their situation. As a result, she is now recognized as a role model in the village.
- ▶ Created a support group. The project brought young women together to form a support network which meets regularly to discuss different issues and ways to handle identified problems. The group even agreed to pay FJD 2 per week to build an education fund, and is registered with the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation so that their interaction with line ministries will become more systematic.
- ▶ Improved relationships: The women reported their relationship with their respective families had strengthened due to the initiative by the CHWs and VSHC. They also reported that they better understood their own responsibilities within their families and in their communities.
- ▶ Changed mindsets: Vanua structures are typically disinclined to change. The fact that the Bose Va Koreo (which consist predominantly of male elders) consented to the VSHC intervention indicated a change in traditional mindsets. Some of the young women who attended the workshop reported that their elders were beginning to understand the problems young women face and to accept support from VSHC on this issue.

► Employment opportunities: Five young women who participated in the workshops obtained employment in the hospitality industry. Some young mothers started to engage in small income generating projects, such as planting and selling fruits, vegetables, or handicrafts such tie-dying taught by Empower Pacific. Two members of the support group sell roti and curry at the group’s meeting and other events.

LESSONS LEARNED

► A well conducted initiative can transform mindsets, instil confidence and hope, and enable vital skills and knowledge transfer. This case is a prime example of effective citizen–government collaboration.

► A collective strategy was devised through in-depth assessment and relevant Government and community stakeholder engagement. This case demonstrates that an empowering approach helped reduce the cultural and social stigmas associated with teen pregnancies and opened up the possibility for concerted action.

► In the target community, only 8 out of 33 women completed the full programme. More attention needs to go towards understanding why more women were unable to participate fully and how to properly incentivize participation.



Photo Credit: Viseisei Sai Health Centre







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