

SCEFI EMBLEMATIC STORIES

Sawaieke Youth:

Preserving Traditional Knowledge



EUROPEAN UNION

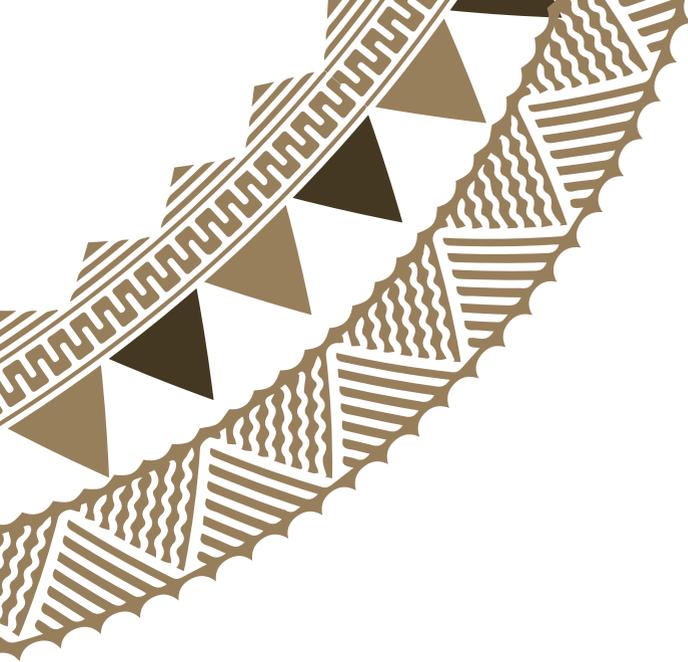


Strengthening
Citizen Engagement
in Fiji Initiative



50
YEARS

Empowered lives. Resilient nations.



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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Sawaieke Youth:

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SUMMARY

The iTaukei communities of the Fiji Islands traditionally relied on “word of mouth” transmission of cultural identity, values and knowledge. The onset of modernity, however, no longer guarantees reliance on the home or community to transmit cultural and traditional knowledge. The intangible cultural heritage of various groups in many parts of Fiji is diminishing due to factors such as rural-to-urban migration and the lack of transmission from community elders to the younger generation. In 2015, young people in the island of Gau in East Fiji took action to revive their traditional knowledge and ways of life by organizing a one-week “Traditional Technologies Exposition”. This initiative, supported by UNDP’s Strengthening Citizen Engagement in Fiji Initiative (SCEFI), involved training of young people in 8 villages in Gau by volunteer experts on a range of traditional skills and activities. It raised awareness on the critical importance of preserving traditional knowledge and culture, and led to strengthening inter-generational relationships between young people and community elders.

INTRODUCTION

Indigenous Fijians are taught that every family within a specific community has a set of roles and responsibilities towards the collective. This includes the transmittal of special knowledge and skills passed down from generation to generation by word of mouth. The preservation of this cultural knowledge rests on its continued usage and observance, some daily and others periodically during festivals and special community ceremonies. Factors such as increased rural-to-urban migration have led to a breakdown in this transmission.

Moreover, elders in the community, the main custodians of traditional knowledge, are dying at a faster rate compared to the rate at which this information is being captured and shared. As the traditional values that once provided a basis for communal living degrade, so does social cohesion. Fijian youth lack understanding for traditional structures, relationships and responsibilities because they are no longer being taught traditional knowledge of their ancestors.

Young people in the district of Sawaieke district in Gau recognised the importance of addressing the issue of preserving their cultural heritage, and wanted to take action before it was too late. The Sawaieke District



Photo Credit: Sawaieke District Youth Council

Youth Council (SDYC) is responsible for helping empower the young people of the eight villages in Sawaieke. SDYC approached UNDP's Strengthening Citizen Engagement in Fiji Initiative (SCEFI) to obtain support for an initiative they had well thought out. SCEFI's facilitator, being a teacher from Gau, related well to the youth. After discussions with the facilitator and staff of the SCEFI Secretariat, the youth of Sawaieki designed an innovative project that would enable the inter-generational transfer of traditional technologies to the community (see Box 1). There are currently very few elders left on the island with traditional knowledge and skills. The project therefore became a first-ever event where young people in 8 target communities were trained on a variety of traditional activities, skills and knowledge by elders who were experts.



Photo Credit: Sawaieke District Youth Council

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.

PROCESS: REVIVING TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE THROUGH TRAINING

The youth of Sawaieke organized a week-long event that brought together 107 people from 8 communities. They were supported in their preparations by the SCEFI facilitator who first conducted a scoping mission along with the youth to ensure buy-in and support from the targeted communities. Key individuals in the communities, including the Paramount Chief and Acting Takala-I-Gau, Church Minister, Head of the Women’s Group and District Youth Worker, were consulted during the preparatory process. All stakeholders gave their unconditional support to the effort. The group also engaged with the iTaukei Affairs Board and the Department of Language and Culture of the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs to gain assistance and avail their expertise.

The first-ever “Traditional Technologies Expo” was held in December 2015 in Sawaieke Village as a week-long programme. The 107 participants were comprised of 52 men and 28 women ranging from the ages of 8–69 years (see Table 1). The trainers for the event were 17 experts in different forms of traditional knowledge who volunteered to train the participants.



Photo Credit: Sawaieke District Youth Council

Table 1: Participants of the Traditional Technologies Exposition by Age (years)

Age Group	1+	10+	20+	30+	40+	50+	60+
Number of Participants	1	28	20	8	10	10	3

Activities for female participants were:

- ▶ Weaving: fans, fishing baskets (noke) and mats (tabakau) using coconut and voivoi leaves
- ▶ Cooking: traditional breakfast (katalauvakaviti)
- ▶ Dancing and singing: traditional songs and dances (meke)
- ▶ Fishing: using traditional fishing methods

Activities for male participants were:

- ▶ Weaving: Men's basket from coconut leaves–bola, i-su, sova, and tabakau.
- ▶ Planting: traditional way of planting yams kelikeli (unlocking the secrets of the craft)
- ▶ Construction: Building a bure (traditional Fijian home) from technology and materials particular to the eastern islands
- ▶ Fishing: using traditional fishing methods (yavirau)
- ▶ Ceremonial rites: conducting the traditional yaqona ceremony and the proper presentation and reception of yaqona and tabua in a cultural ceremony
- ▶ Dancing and singing: traditional songs and dances (meke)



RESULTS AND IMPACT

- ▶ The Expo played a catalytic role in changing the relationships between young people and elders, as they collectively took responsibility and stewardship of their cultural heritage and its transmission to future generations.
- ▶ The Expo opened the way for future discussions on how elders could continue to enable the transfer of traditional knowledge to young people. Through their interaction with the youth at the Expo, the elders of Sawaieke developed greater understanding of the needs and aspirations of young people. They recognized the commitment of the youth, and agreed to alter decision making structures of the district to accommodate greater inclusion of youth organizations.
- ▶ A notable development was the renewed enthusiasm of youth to learn from the elders, which previously was non-existent. Implementing the project also helped youth leaders build skills in project management and execution.
- ▶ Youth members gained new confidence to speak at their village meetings to articulate concerns of young people. Youth who were not heard in the Bose-Ba Koro (village meetings) and the Tikina meetings (district meetings) are now heard and respected in those spaces.
- ▶ Efforts are being made to institutionalize this cultural transfer of activities in other spaces, such as school curricula. The initiative of Sawaieki youth was also shared with the iTaukei Ministry's Department of Language and Culture. As a result, the Ministry organized a cultural night at the SCEFI Knowledge Fair with music, craft and stories to raise awareness. A group of musicians shared songs from different regions

of Fiji at the event, and young people learned traditional methods for planting root crops and basket weaving.

▶ A new culture of dialogue across generations was initiated as a result of the Expo. Youth who participated in the Sawaieke Expo displayed what they learnt at the Lomaviti Festival (Lomaviti is one of the 14 provinces in Fiji). Led by Sawaieke youth, efforts are also taking place in Gau's two other districts for young people to contribute to keeping their culture alive.

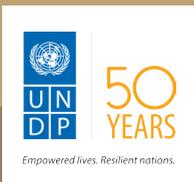
LESSONS LEARNED

▶ Community elders have knowledge to share regarding adaptation measures relevant to natural disaster preparedness, risk reduction, food production systems and weather forecasting. It is critical to codify and preserve their knowledge and enable its transmission to younger generations.

▶ There is lack of recognition of traditional knowledge systems in the formal educational system. Mechanisms are required to recognise and transfer traditional knowledge and its continued usage.

▶ Additional traditional technology expos across Fiji's 14 provinces could emphasise this. Agents such as the Department of Culture and Knowledge of the iTaukei Ministry could take an active part in ensuring that the transfer of traditional knowledge takes place through creative and innovative ways.





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