

SCEFI EMBLEMATIC STORIES

Pasifika Voices:

Social Change through songs and music



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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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SUMMARY

Inter-school rivalry and bullying is an issue that often results in community violence and conflict in Suva, Fiji. In 2013, Pasifika Voices—a youth choir based in the Pacific—launched the Mana Choral Festival, an innovative Arts-based programme involving participation of students from rival high schools. The preparatory process leading up to the Festival’s first performance in November 2013 involved close interaction and dialogue among the students. As a result, they began to examine their perceptions of each other, develop an understanding of their deeply rooted beliefs and of the wider negative impacts of high school rivalry on their communities. In 2014, UNDP’s Strengthening Citizen Engagement in Fiji Initiative (SCEFI) supported the organisation of a second workshop and performance of the Mana Choral Festival.

INTRODUCTION

Inter-school rivalry among high schools in Suva is a long-standing problem passed through generations of alumni and parents, and fueled by competitive inter-school tournaments. Violent brawls and incidents of bullying among students of rival schools result in injuries and even death. In 2013, Pasifika Voices, a choir composed of a group of Pacific artists based at the University of the South Pacific in Fiji, launched an initiative to address the problem of inter-school rivalry. It teamed up with highschools in Suva to initiate the Mana Choir Festival, an integrated, inclusive school performance by choirs from different schools. The Festival sought to bring together students from rival schools and present opportunities for them to interact within a conducive environment using music and songs. Participants were also simultaneously encouraged to challenge their preconceived ideas about each other. The Festival's overall objectives were to:

- ▶ end the cycle of violence and reduce bullying within the high school community
- ▶ teach tolerance and unity in students and help them develop more socially acceptable attitudes
- ▶ establish avenues and platforms for youth voices to be heard in schools
- ▶ instill understanding of the power of youth voices through songs.

PROCESS: UNDERSTANDING 'THE OTHER' THROUGH DIALOGUE, MUSIC AND SONG

BOX 1. Who are the Pasifika Voices?

Pasifika Voices is a choir comprising of multi-regional and inter-faith youth. It was established in 2007 by students and graduates of the University of the South Pacific to reach audiences through a celebration of the traditions and cultures of the Pacific Region. Pasifika Voices uses music and dance to communicate messages of unity, peace and cultural pride to its audiences. The group has been involved in school choir competitions since 2007, and develops original theatrical performances with dance, art and music to disseminate its messages. The choir has an outreach mission to inspire, empower and serve the public.

Strategic efforts by Pasifika Voices led students on a journey of collective self-awareness and improved the nature of interactions with each other.

- ▶ Prior to the event, Pasifika Voices enlisted the help of the Ministry of Education to identify high schools which urgently required intervention. This critical support ensured that the respective school administrations assisted in facilitating the process.
- ▶ Pasifika Voices organized a series of rehearsals and workshops during which students were taught not only music and voice techniques, but also about bullying and tolerance. Group discussions were held on violence in school and their wider impacts on students and the community at large. Students were encouraged to examine the beliefs, values and practices with which they have been socialized at home and from school peers.
- ▶ A nationally televised event was planned for the first integrated performance of the Festival. Students worked as a team to prepare

for their national performance with songs of positive social messages about peace. Long hours of rehearsals were instrumental in creating an environment where the students worked together and got to know each other on a personal level. Such interactions helped students put aside their misconceptions about each other, while strengthening solidarity among them.

RESULTS AND IMPACT

The first integrated high school performance of the Mana Choral Festival, with a 'Dare to Imagine' theme, was conducted in November 2013 in Suva. The event was televised nationally and internationally with 1.5 million viewers. The Festival provided students with an important vehicle for self-expression, rarely available for young people in Fijian society.

- ▶ Students from different schools learned to work together despite their history of conflict. Testimonials from students attested to the initiative's positive impacts on their self confidence, as they developed their capacity in music and opened up pathways to communicate their thoughts and feelings more freely.
- ▶ Surveys conducted after the Festival with teachers and students at the relevant high schools reported a decrease of violent school rivalry.
- ▶ Students who participated in the Festival reported that they disseminated the message in their respective schools that the other schools were not competitors but partners from which they all collectively drew strength.

In December 2014, with assistance from UNDP's Strengthening Citizen Engagement in Fiji Initiative, Pasifika Voices held a second workshop and performance of the Mana Choral Festival. Given the proximity of the Christmas season, the performance featured Christmas music (see Box 2).

BOX 2. 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.

LESSONS LEARNED

- ▶ Young people responded better to educational interventions when peer-to-peer learning is involved, when language is made accessible and messages are contextualized and relevant to the target group. Programmes such as the Mana Choral Festival can be powerful mechanisms to foster positive social change through constructive peer to peer influence.
- ▶ School rivalry and bullying generally occur because of preconceived ideas and misconceptions young people learn from their peers and families. Such beliefs can be deep rooted and require long-term and concerted effort to change.



Photo Credit: Pasifika Voices



Photo Credit: Pasifika Voices

- ▶ Music and the Arts are powerful mediums for addressing social issues and influencing social change. The Mana Choral Festival is an important example of the way in which conflicting parties can be brought together to engage in dialogue through the Arts. In this case, songs and music were the tools.
- ▶ Significant operational costs associated with Arts-based programmes are an impediment to their sustainability. Mechanisms like the Fiji National Arts Council and the University of the South Pacific Oceania Arts Centre provide support to development of artistic expressions, but have limited funding. Consequently, groups such as Pasifika Voices rely mainly on bilateral assistance from donor countries. Youth-related programmes based on the use of creative arts, are usually also not a priority for donors. While the private sector lends financial assistance, this is often tied to a purpose of publicizing private sector products. Mechanisms for sustaining and promoting a vibrant arts industry for peer education and learning should be encouraged.





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