

Sustainable Project

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SUPPORTING THE HEALTH OF FIJIAN WOMEN

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INTRODUCTION

In this paper we present a sustainable project that supports the health of women situated in the Pacific Island community of Nasovotava, Fiji. We showcase how nurse learners from the School of Nursing, Otago Polytechnic, Dunedin, New Zealand collaborated with the community stakeholders from this island nation to identify the health needs of women, then worked collaboratively to improve health inequities. We discuss sustainability as it relates to this sustainable project in four parts, sustainability; United Nations Sustainable Development Goals; sustainable project; identified community needs and development of resources.

Sustainability

There is a growing need to understand sustainability as it relates to health and nursing practice (McMillan, 2014). In 2000 the United Nations set out an aspirational goal to reduce extreme poverty through global community engagement, supported by the Millennium Declaration (United Nations, 2019). Monkelbaan (2019) states that in 2015 the Millennium Declaration Goal was reviewed by the United Nations and led to the development of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's) (United Nations, 2019). This new vision recognises the basic components which allow for sustainable development of communities, including the eradication of poverty; combatting inequality and preserving the planet which are intrinsically linked with the foundations identified as social determinants of health (Marmot & Wilkinson, 2006). SDGs includes seventeen sustainable goals with specific indicators which provides a framework for global communities to endeavor and achieve hopefully by the year 2030. Implementation of the SDG's has been identified as imperative on a regional and global level, while working collaboratively to realise the vision of social equity amongst populations.

For the purposes of this paper our focus relates to sustainability, health, and community development, supported by the 17 Sustainable Development Goals as highlighted above (United Nations, 2019). Sustainable health links to the United Nation General Assembly who make specific mention of the vulnerability of Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and the impetus with which the larger global community must respond.

New Zealand is committed to global solutions and sustainable development with special consideration for SIDS, working towards achieving Goal 17, identified as Partnership for the Goals (New Zealand Voluntary Review, 2019). This partnership fosters intercultural understanding, mutual respect and builds on the ethic of global citizenship and shared responsibility (United Nations, 2019). The School of Nursing at Otago Polytechnic, Dunedin is equally committed to assist in achieving the SDGs (United Nations, 2019) at a 'grass roots' level by incorporating the concepts of global citizenship within nurse learning. Incorporating a 'grass roots' approach can allow for small measurements of success that build upon the momentum and lead to significant and meaningful change, a goal we set out to achieve by engaging in this sustainable project. The following example discussed in this paper showcases one such grass-roots approach to sustainable community health in the remote Pacific Island community of Nasovotava, Fiji.

Sustainable Project

In 2019 a Community of Practice was founded at Otago Polytechnic and became known as Project Fiji. Project Fiji is a committee established as a joint venture in community development with a focus on collaborating and supporting future projects in the villages of Nasovotava and Nadroumai, Fiji. Community development discussions with Fijian stakeholders (residing in Dunedin at that time who assisted in face-to-face collaboration), was established, and developed the vision for Project Fiji. This vision was to achieve positive outcomes aligning with the United Nations 17 SDGs of 2030, with an initial focus on Health and Wellbeing through the provision of Water and Sanitation (WASH) projects. The focus of this project was identified as most pressing by Fijian community elders and leaders, and established a five-year plan identifying needs and collaborating with learners from Otago Polytechnic Schools of Engineering and Nursing.

Due to COVID-19 and the declaration of a global pandemic, all opportunities to physically collaborate and engage with the goal of this committee became unattainable. Shifting context since 2020, has allowed for virtual engagement with global communities. Third-year nurse learners completed their primary health care clinical placements successfully during COVID-19 through a facilitated virtual platform with the communities of Bishop's Castle, Shropshire, United Kingdom and Liro, Paama, Vanuatu. This provided a framework to further develop virtual engagement and through discussion with the Project Fiji committee members it was agreed that virtual engagement (rather than physical face-to-face engagement) would be viable and the community of Nasovotava was proposed as an initial focus. Through collaboration with village elders, health care workers in this community and the Dunedin based Fijian community stakeholders, together with a team of eight third-year Bachelor of Nursing learners from Otago Polytechnic, School of Nursing, a sustainable project commenced in May 2022.

CHASE Model

The learners applied the Community Health Assessment Sustainable Education (CHASE) model (Ross, Crawley & Mahoney, 2017) to guide the project. The first aspect of this was to get to know the community of Nasovotava, Fiji.

COMMUNITY OF NASOVOTAVA, FIJI

Fiji is in the South Pacific Ocean approximately 2,100km north of Auckland, New Zealand (Macdonald, 2022). It consists of around 300 islands distributed over 1.3 million square kilometres, however only 100 of these islands are inhabited by the Fijian population (Macdonald, 2022). The largest island in Fiji is Viti Levu, where Nasovotava is located south-east and inland from Nadi, it is approximately a two-and-a-half-hour drive from the nearest urbanised town of Sigatoka (Macdonald, 2022). Nasovotava is situated in a valley surrounded by Fiji's dense forestry and mountain terrain and has a population of 270 people, 50 households, and 60 families (E. Nabalagi 2022, pers. comm.). The locals of Nasovotava use the vegetation provided by the natural environment for medication and healing processes. There is a river that runs by the village which provides the local villages with fresh drinking water; however, water can become scarce during the dry season (E. Nabalagi 2022, pers. comm.).

Nasovotava has limited transportation which can restrict the community's accessibility to services such as healthcare and schooling. The village is very secluded, it has one dirt road that provides access to the village. In 2019 the Fijian government collaborated with the village to purchase a truck to help transport children to and from school every day. Nasovotava is a one hour walk to the main road, from there a bus can be taken to the nearest urbanised community, Sigatoka, which takes a further 90 minutes by vehicle (E. Nabalagi 2022, pers. comm.).

Due to coastal beaches and recreational attractions, Fiji has positioned itself as a go-to tourism country of the Pacific. This is due to its optimal location near Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and the United States which not only makes it easy to travel by air but by cruise ship as well. The tourism industry is based on attractions and duty-free shopping (Macdonald, 2022). In 2017, Fiji received more than 842,000 visitors who spent \$1.9 billion across the tourism industry which employed 118,500 Fijians. The tourism industry contributed approximately 34% towards Fiji's Gross Domestic Product (International Finance Corporation, 2020).

The health needs of the community were identified by a process of profiling and assessing the community, collaborating with community stakeholders, and applying a rapid needs analysis to identify health status of the community and areas within which nursing engagement could facilitate improved health outcomes. Once health needs were identified, learners conducted a literature review to assist with research and development of a sustainable approach that could help facilitate improved health outcomes.



Figure 1. Nurse learners and stakeholders, Otago Polytechnic, School of Nursing, Dunedin, New Zealand.
Source: Cynthia Mullens.

Identified Health Needs

One area of need identified by the nurse learners and confirmed by community stakeholders and the village healthcare worker was women's health. Many women in Nasovotava do not have frequent access to women's health checks or appropriate menstrual hygiene products. Women are responsible for buying their own menstrual hygiene products but the cost for these are a huge barrier for women (M. Matai 2022, pers. comm.). Sustainability is a key theme in making sure the community of Nasovotava can continue improving women's health, especially around the usage and disposal of menstrual hygiene products. In rural Pacific areas, it is more common to use reusable or easily decomposable products such as reusable cloth pads, knitted tampons, menstrual cups, bamboo fibre pads and banana fibre pads, rather than commercial sanitary pads. This is because commercial tampons and sanitary pads are expensive, non-reusable, not environmentally friendly and are not able to be easily accessed. This leads to waste build up and problems with waste disposal.

Most common types of the reusable menstrual hygiene products are washable cloth pads and knitted tampons made up of natural products such as bamboo, wool, hemp, and cotton as these are absorbent materials. These are sustainable sanitary options but must be hygienically washed and dried in the sunlight to become naturally

sterilised (Kaur, R., Kaur, K., & Kaur, R., 2018). The tampons can be knitted or crocheted into specific shapes that can be inserted into the vagina to absorb the menstrual flow (Kaur, et al., 2018). Furthermore, access and the use of these cloth pads have improved the attendance at school compared to those students that do not have any menstrual products (Hennegan, 2017). Hennegan (2017) noted that although providing sanitary pads did improve education attendance, it did not address other challenges of managing menstruation such as the washing and drying of the pads. This is a further area identified as a health issue by the learners so these pads could be used effectively and sustainably.

As part of conducting this sustainable project the learners developed the following health promotion resources to be considered by the women of the community with the aim to improve this health issue.

Health Promotion Resources

Not having access to sanitary products has a huge negative impact on women's health in Fiji. This lack of access can occur due to financial and geographical barriers. In Fiji the price of commercial sanitary products can be a burden to women and their families. This is because many women and adolescent girls in both urban and rural areas are living below the poverty line (Vogel, et al., 2022). Women are often faced with the difficult choice between purchasing food or sanitary items. The nurse learners endorsed the use of sustainable menstrual products, such as cloth pads, banana fibre pads, and reusable tampons to improve women's reproductive health and decrease the amount of waste disposal. Introducing reusable products that are eco-friendly, affordable, and the resources are easily accessible has a greater impact on improving health needs in a sustainable way (Kaur, et al., 2018). There can be multiple negative impacts on women because of improper disposal of commercial menstrual hygiene products. There can often be feelings of embarrassment when women are not able to dispose of sanitary products discreetly. Therefore, often women exclude themselves from the community when experiencing menstruation and this can cause emotional distress and shame associated with their menstrual cycle. Commercial sanitary pads are expensive and do not decompose easily therefore are unsustainable for the rural community of Nasovotava. To assist the women of Nasovotava and improve their health, nurse learners developed templates and instructions on how to create reusable sanitary pads as a health promotion resource that will not only improve on current health needs but one which can also continue to be built upon in the future (Figure 2).

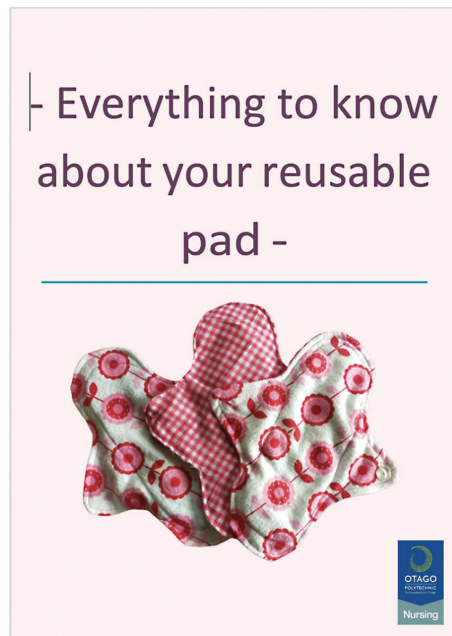


Figure 2. Health Promotion Resource Developed.
Source: Cynthia Mullens.



Figure 3. Nurse learners, stakeholders, and volunteers from Otago Polytechnic, School of Nursing, Dunedin, New Zealand.
Source: Cynthia Mullens.

The learners also produced these reusable hygiene products for distribution for the women of the community. The learners engaged in a one-day workshop (12 hours of sewing) (Figure 3) that allowed for 125 sanitary pads to be made, and though a shortfall from their desired goal, the capacity to continue to develop the products has been distributed to the community with delivery of the products made by one of the Dunedin stakeholders who visited Nasovotava, Fiji, in October 2022. (Figure 4). Together with the sanitary pads, instruction manuals etc. were the raw materials to allow for start-up in the community by the women themselves.



Figure 4. Delivery of developed resources to community village health worker in Nasovotava, Fiji.
Source: E. Nabalagi and Community Stakeholder (published with permission).


CONCLUSION

The community of Nasovotava, Fiji was the chosen community to work in partnership with nurse learners from Otago Polytechnic, Dunedin, New Zealand to promote and implement new strategies to improve women's health. The development and utilisation of sustainable menstrual hygiene products contributes to achieving the *SDG Goal 3 Good Health and Wellbeing* of the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2019). This community development project related to women's health has also contributed to the *SDG Goal 17: Partnership for the Goals* which is important for sharing knowledge, expertise, technologies, and financial resources to support the achievement of the sustainable development goals in all countries, particularly developing countries like Fiji. The goal has been to work in partnership with the women of Nasovotava, Fiji to ensure that these health goals align with the health needs of the women in a culturally safe manner.

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Jean Ross  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2467-9233> is Professor of Nursing, originally from Wales, UK. Jean has more than 30 years' experience of working with the rural nursing workforce in New Zealand. The cumulation of her work associated with rural nursing includes activism, research, and education. Education includes undergraduate, postgraduate and doctoral engagement. Jean in 1994–2003 established the Centre for Rural Health in New Zealand of which she was co-director. Jean is also an advocate for sustainable rural community development and nurse education. Jean's focus is research directive which both informs and directs her practice.

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