



Salamander Trust

TRANSFORMING THE WAY WE THINK ABOUT HIV

Following Stepping Stones from Ecuador to Fiji: From 'Hola' to 'Bula'

By Amandine Bollinger, Coordinator of the Stepping Stones Community of Practice, following her visit to Fiji on behalf of the Salamander Trust in December 2010.

Stepping Stones first came to the Pacific in 2006 with PHRP (Partners for Health Reform Project), driven originally by a very dynamic group of people – Tamara Kwarteng, Sala Tupou-Tamani, Jovesa Saladoka, and Robyn Drysdale. Great trainers from Africa such as Baron Oron (Uganda) and Mzikazi Nduna (South Africa) were specially invited across to train local facilitators on Stepping Stones. Despite many challenges, the determination and dedication of the team – Emily Miller, Julia Fationoto, Robyn Drysdale then Leaine Robinson and Margaret Leniston and now Tura Lewai, Albert Cerala and Nicole Cave – has made the programme possible in the Pacific.

The original Stepping Stones manual was adapted to the Pacific context, both in terms of layout and content. Important new sessions such as teenage pregnancy, STIs, sexuality, and more on gender violence were added, covering areas that implementers of Stepping Stones in other parts of the world are regularly mentioning that they would like Stepping Stones to focus on. We can now tell them that this material is available, thanks to the great work done in the Pacific. We will also share with them the cheeky new energisers like The Watermelon Song, now also known as “The Stepping Stones Song” in the Pacific.

While the adaptation of the manual has been impressive, the work done in implementing it has been really remarkable. It's worth mentioning the successes of the Solomon Islands, through the efforts of Oxfam and the Ministry of Health. Those of Fiji (also supported by the MoH) where the hard work of FJN+ has come to fruition since they are the first organisation in the region to have successfully completed the programme; and where FSPI has made very high on its agenda the issue of engaging men through the work of its two great gender champions: Albert Ceralala and Tura Lewai. Finally, congratulations to Vanuatu and Solomon Islands on the translations of Stepping Stones into Bislama and Pijin!

While new country implementers, such as Chuuk, Guam and Vanuatu are facing difficulties in reaching out to participants and retaining communities in the programme, there is no doubt that the excellent teams there will find ways to

overcome the obstacles because of the way in which they have set about learning from the experiences across the region.

Around the world, a lot of organisations struggle with implementing Stepping Stones because it is a process that requires a lot of mediated learning and mentoring. The Pacific experience is recent and rich and the collected Pacific learnings will be an excellent resource to share with others in need of that knowledge.

In addition, the vast amount of work that has been put into M&E in the Pacific puts the region's programmes at the forefront of Stepping Stones programmes worldwide. Similar to Central America, collaboration is happening at the regional level (rather than the national level as is usually the case).

If I hadn't been lucky enough to be invited to the first Stepping Stones Pacific regional retreat, held this month in Fiji. I would never have fully understood the wealth of experience, knowledge and enthusiasm in this part of the world. I was asked to bring sessions on challenging homophobia and supporting diversity; and on exploring the issues raised by migration, which were both developed in Latin America by Soledad Guayasamín. The response to them, despite being in a different cultural context, was fascinating and highlighted the relevance of running such sessions in the region. In turn, I will be able to take sessions developed in the Pacific such as those addressing teenage pregnancy and gender violence back to Latin America, since they have been looking at ways of meeting the great need for more content in these areas.

The excellent work in the Pacific is a testimony to the passion, dedication and vision of all those involved in the programme. As in other parts of the world Stepping Stones has lived, succeeded and grown because there have been people to believe in it and fight for it. Generosity, creativity and commitment – this is what makes Stepping Stones possible.

Thank you for having me for the week, and for giving me a piece of your warmth and wisdom. As Tura Lewai (Gender and Arts Officer, FSPI) mentioned to me: "Every good thing starts with challenges, you will always face challenges and these challenges make the work sweeter and indicate that you are heading in the right direction"

Love to all,

Amandine