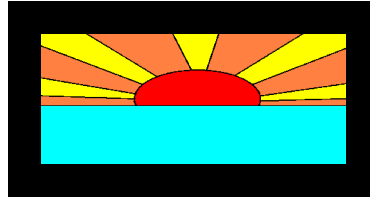


PACIFIC PSYCHOSOCIAL FORUM 2008

POST FORUM SUMMARY REPORT

Nurturing Professional Practice: Psychosocial support for emerging aid and development managers



The Pacific Forum and subsequent support for ongoing staff support initiatives in the Pacific Region have been made possible by the funding of the Australian Government, AusAID.

This paper is a summary of the Antares Foundation Pacific Psychosocial Forum that was held in Vanuatu from the 13th to 16th of October, 2008 at the Chiefs Nakamal, Port Vila.

Planning for the Forum was led by a local planning group comprising members of the Vanuatu Interagency Mental Health Network representing local and international NGOs within Vanuatu.

The main aim of the Forum was to increase the awareness of a psychosocial approach to a) staff support and b) program development within aid and development agencies within Vanuatu and the broader Pacific Region.

Key program features of the Forum included:

- Psychosocial approaches to supporting local mental health issues
- Systemic approaches to supporting the health & wellbeing of NGO staff and volunteers
- Special issues relevant to the Pacific (gender, counseling, workplace issues, research)
- Introduction to psychosocial support in emergency settings
- Meetings of local, regional and global peer support networks
- Practical case studies, interactive discussions, playback theatre and youth panel

Emerging from the many and varied Forum discussions and presentations were key points that were felt to be pertinent to working in and supporting programs in the Pacific context.

Key to supporting aid staff in the Pacific:

- Encourage and affirm emerging aid and development managers to consider staff wellbeing as integral to their role
- Identify and strengthen existing staff support and professional development networks
- Plan an integrated system of psychosocial support for staff in communities
- Implement staff support practices and policies that are mindful of cultural context, roles and practices
- Conduct cross-cultural training and preparation for volunteers and aid and development workers
- Schedule in-country briefings with national staff and teams
- Implement effective human resource practices
- Regularly value and support the diverse range and health and disability needs of staff and volunteers

Key to supporting community in the Pacific:

- Respect existing strengths, cultural context and identity
- Identify and strengthen existing community support mechanisms
- Foster community cohesion and social support
- Support programs that involve both traditional and non-traditional methods
- Recognize the transitional aspects and multiplicities of women's roles
- Encourage dialogue and provide a safe space to nurture different voices such as youth and women and those with disabilities
- Understand stressors and usual ways of coping in communities in order to help provide culturally sensitive psychosocial support
- Recognize and support the resilience of communities in emergencies and
- Support emergency preparedness

A highly collaborative approach to developing the Forum Program was achieved by working with a local planning committee in Vanuatu who played a pivotal role in determining program content, format and order, presenters, venue and setting.

The benefits of this approach included a strong sense of ownership and empowerment of local planning staff, respect for local cultural context and preferred ways of learning as well as increased relevance of content to the needs of Pacific staff and organizations.

Sustainability strategies

An important aim of the Forum was to ensure that the learning and outcomes that arise from the Forum could be fostered, strengthened and sustained beyond the conclusion of the 3-day Forum.

From this viewpoint, the following approaches to increasing sustainability were and will continue to be applied by the Antares Foundation Inc. (Australia):

- Involvement of local planning groups to ensure psychosocial content and topics are relevant and guided by local context
- Membership of a local planning group drawn from existing mental health network and NGOs
- Representation on local planning groups from a range of local and international NGOs, thereby increasing scope of influence and involvement
- Establishment of a Pacific Staff Support Coordinator to continue to work post-Forum with existing networks and organizations on psychosocial approaches to staff support
- Consultation with key local stakeholders in determining ongoing support needs
- Ensuring that local network members are involved in and inform ongoing activities such as translation of materials and adaptation to local context
- Linkages where relevant to existing key projects and contacts such as government, NGOs and communities
- Provision of some mentoring, advice and capacity building support to local staff interested in supporting ongoing psychosocial initiatives current work in Vanuatu or broader the Pacific
- Ongoing monitoring and evaluation practices to track progress and adapt as needed to meet project objectives and ensure ongoing relevance to local context and needs
- Support to facilitate opportunities for ongoing social connections and sharing of Forum outcomes and staff support momentum.

It was because of the voices of the young Pacific NGO staff, who in 2007, expressed concerns about the psychosocial issues and challenges they faced and the need for support and training in psychosocial approaches to staff support and program development that this Pacific Forum took place. Tankyu tumas to all who supported, attended, sponsored and presented.