Reflections on a Pacific regional event held in New Zealand: exploring best practice for serving Pacific communities

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ABSTRACT
The aim of this paper is to explore best practice, practical, collaborative and culturally-informed solutions for organising events to serve identified areas of importance for Pacific regional countries. This paper describes the design and implementation of a two-day hands-on workshop designed to support organizational capacity and strengthen innovation, solutions, and communication around mosquito-borne diseases in the Pacific region. The workshop (TechCamp New Zealand) was organised by the University of Otago in collaboration with the U.S. Consulate General New Zealand and with support from the Pacific Community. We share our experiences with the objective of supporting partnership approaches by governments, research institutions and other non-profit organisations when engaging with Pacific countries.

BACKGROUND
O le tele o sulu e maua ai se figota – My strength does not come from me alone, but from many – Samoan Proverb. (Working together collaboratively will enhance the support we provide our Pacific neighbours) The Pacific region is unlike any other region in the world with twenty-two different island nations and territories, each with their own distinct cultures and communities, connected by the Pacific Ocean which spans an area greater than all of the earth’s land area combined. While diversity of cultures and languages is unique and distinctive in this large region, there are challenges facing the region as a whole. One of these challenges for communities in the Pacific is reducing the presence and spread of vector-borne diseases. Since 2012, there have been significant increases in vector-borne diseases in the Pacific region.1 On a global scale, addressing the burden of vector-borne diseases requires inter- and intra-sectoral action and collaboration.2 Because the Pacific consists of geographically isolated islands, it provides opportunities and the real possibility of eradicating vector-borne diseases. However, in order to achieve this goal requires collective, coordinated and innovative approaches; exploring and sharing of information between countries; and engagement with experts working outside of Pacific Island nations for support and assistance.

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This paper describes efforts to promote collaborative and innovative approaches to the reduction of vector-borne diseases in Oceania by bringing together key personnel with expert trainers in an interactive technology-focused workshop (TechCamp New Zealand). The aim of this paper is to explore the various cultural and logistical challenges arising in relation to implementing TechCamp New Zealand, and to consider practical and culturally-appropriate solutions with a view to informing others organising Pacific regional events, whether in New Zealand or the Pacific region. We share our
experiences with the objective of supporting partnership approaches by governments, research institutions and other non-profit organisations when engaging with Pacific countries. Specific challenges related to working with funding partners, hosting a Pacific regional event in New Zealand, and the ability to translate short-term training opportunities into longer-term capacity building benefits, will be discussed. The key stages associated with event organisation, implementation and follow-on activities provide a framework for the discussion. The paper is written from the viewpoint of the local implementing partner (rather than the funder) as they were responsible for the main operational and logistical aspects of organising and implementing the event.

Context

In January 2018, key personnel working in the area of vector-borne diseases in a number of Pacific Island countries (PICs) travelled to Auckland, New Zealand, for a two-day interactive technology-focused workshop. The workshop aimed to support and strengthen organizational capacity, innovation, solutions, and communication around mosquito-borne diseases in the Pacific region. The event was part of a public diplomacy program funded by the U.S. Department of State known as TechCamps: workshops designed to “explore and apply innovative tech solutions to global issues” by connecting technology experts from the private sector with participants from key populations.

TechCamps follow a prescribed format in which a local implementing partner (the grantee) works with a “post” of the U.S. Department of State to organise and manage all logistics associated with the event and related follow-on activities. Given the focus on vector-borne diseases and concerns over potential negative implications for tourism for Pacific nations, New Zealand was selected as the host country for this regional event and the University of Otago’s Division of Health Sciences’ Pacific arm (Va’a o Tautai) assumed the role of the local implementing partner.

Initial Preparation and Logistics

As the local implementing partner, Va’a o Tautai had strong institutional infrastructure, Pacific regional relationships and networks, and a diverse team of staff to organise the various logistical aspects of TechCamp New Zealand. The University of Otago has strategic priorities to support national and regional Pacific communities and countries via the University’s Pacific Strategic Framework. The institution has a growing understanding of the communities and cultures of the Pacific, with the leaders of both the Division of Health Sciences and the University as a whole being supportive of the TechCamp initiative (as well as other strategic and day-to-day Pacific initiatives).

Within Va’a o Tautai, the team allocated specific staff time to coordinate and work alongside the U.S. Consulate General New Zealand to develop and deliver the programme. The initial preparation involved weekly teleconference calls between the key staff in both organisations where brainstorming approaches led to specific concrete plans. Each organisation had specific roles with Va’a o Tautai leading the overall operation and coordination of the event with support from the U.S. Consulate General New Zealand, particularly in connecting with “trainers” in the form of researchers, innovators and vector-control experts. Staff with relevant clinical and academic expertise at the University of Otago—including those with expertise in the epidemiology of vector-borne diseases—provided guidance for the development of the TechCamp New Zealand programme and further contextual understanding of the challenges facing the Pacific region. This included working together in the planning process with an academic convenor with an interest in global health.

Observations around best processes for partnership approaches to event planning:

1. **Roles and responsibilities**: Responsibility for particular tasks should be clearly delineated and reflect the respective roles of the partner organisations (and by extension their staff). Clear lines of communication among team members should be established from the outset.

2. **Regular information sharing and accountability**: Establishing mechanisms for efficient and effective information sharing should happen early, including regular schedules of meetings (whether in person or via remote link). Meeting minutes with clearly stated actions and timelines are critical and form an important repository of information for future reference or in the event of staff turnover.

3. **Objectives**: The objectives for the event should be clearly documented and mutually agreed between partners at the outset, with
consideration given to any strategic objectives associated with the funding source.

4. **Expert input**: Individuals with relevant expertise, as well as sensitivity and competence in the Pacific cultural context, are a valuable resource and their engagement in an advisory capacity should be sought early in the planning process.

**Participant identification / nominations**

The initial process for recruitment of participants entailed an open-call for nominations, undertaken with support from the Pacific Community (SPC) and the New Zealand U.S. Consulate-General, with the aim of developing a list of specific people working in vector-control in the Pacific region.

Difficulties encountered in implementing this approach—for example, uncertainty around identifying the appropriate in-country personnel—led to a subsequent decision to invite the Ministers of Health for each respective country to identify suitable nominees for participation. This approach was adopted to ensure that the countries would have autonomy in nominating appropriate participants and pave the way for ongoing alliances with these Island nations. Adopting this alternative recruitment strategy led to significant delays in the nomination process, however, nullified the subsequent need for nominees to seek authorization and approval for leave from their superiors.

Requests for nominations were sent to the respective Ministers of Health in the Fiji Islands, Cook Islands, Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), Republic of Palau, Papua New Guinea (PNG), Solomon Islands, Samoa, Tonga and Niue as per prior agreement with the funding partner.

Contact details were obtained via Ministry of Health websites (and via a list provided by SPC). Subsequent follow-up phone calls to confirm receipt of the nomination letters identified numerous issues, including some listed email addresses being incorrect, staff using personal email addresses due to issues with local government servers, and changes of personnel that had not been notified.

**Observations around best processes for engagement and recruitment of participants:**

1. **Level of engagement**: Approaches to Pacific nations should be targeted to

highest appropriate level of relevant government agency/department to

protect relationships and minimize the likelihood of future barriers to engagement.

2. **Approach**: Initial phone calls directly to local Ministries of Health (or relevant agencies) to confirm the names and contact details are recommended. Obtaining an alternate email address of intended email recipients is helpful. Assistance to engage relevant recipients and confirm contact details may also be provided by local partners (e.g., NZ High Commission, SPC). A well-designed electronic template for nominations will ensure all necessary details are provided during the initial point of contact (include mobile and alternate email fields).

3. **Timeframe**: An extended timeframe for identification of participants should be allowed, as delays are likely. These delays can be due to in-country priorities, limited internet access, change of responsibilities for identified nominees and obtaining required sign-off from superiors. Correspondence should address potential barriers to participation (e.g., costs associated with travel).

4. **Visa requirements**: Difficulties obtaining NZ Visitor Visa resulted some PIC participants being unable to travel to New Zealand. It is helpful to enquire about these requirements early, so support can be provided to assist participants to travel.

**Workshop design**

A key objective of the workshop was to encourage innovative, locally-based outreach strategies to increase community engagement in mosquito control and vector-borne disease reduction, including the use of readily available technology and tools. To achieve this objective, a team of international and local “trainers” provided participants with training on easy-to-implement, free or low-cost technologies and strategies to address challenges in vector control and vector-borne disease reduction. Pre-workshop online survey feedback was solicited via Survey Monkey to determine country-specific challenges and needs in relation to vector control and to ascertain participants’ technology skills and access to various forms of technology in their work context.
The nature and skill level of the workshops on offer was informed by the survey feedback, with cognisance of the highly variable level of self-reported technological skills and access to relevant tools (e.g., laptops, smartphones, tablets) within the group. Workshop topics included effective mHealth (mobile health) intervention design, use of apps for vector surveillance, mapping and data visualisation, smartphone video production, designing community strategies (health informatics), and utilising a score card for vector control program review.

A University of Otago Division of Health Sciences summer research scholarship enabled a review of the international literature on mosquito control to identify the most effective evidence-based interventions, as well as an investigation into current mosquito control and surveillance in the ten Pacific Island countries. The project results informed a powerpoint presentation delivered at TechCamp New Zealand and was shared with participants following the event, as well as forming the basis of a publication.6

Observations around best processes for developing workshop content:

1. Tailored solutions:
   a. Local needs (e.g., for information, skills training, etc.) and available resources should inform workshop development to ensure content relevance and feasibility of application to real-life settings.
   b. Access to, and familiarity with, various forms of technology is highly variable across the Pacific region and between individuals. Any training involving technological tools and solutions must be informed by the local context.

2. Research and capacity building:
   Opportunities for relevant research should be considered as a means of building capacity as well as sharing of evidence-based information.

Small Grants Competition

On Day One, trainers gave a brief overview of their workshop content and each participant selected two of seven possible 90 minute workshops to attend. On Day 2, participants worked in their country groups with trainers and resource people to identify a specific challenge(s) faced in their efforts to reduce mosquito-borne disease and to develop a project solution proposal, drawing on the skills and knowledge acquired during the training sessions. For increased feasibility of implementation, participants were encouraged to develop proposals linked with existing initiatives to combat the spread of vector-borne disease in the Pacific region. A specially designed Word document template was provided to guide the development of the project proposals.

Final draft proposals were considered by a panel of judges and assessed with respect to a range of criteria, with key considerations being project feasibility (including timeframe, methods and budget) and sustainability of project outcomes. Four projects were selected for implementation on the proviso that grants of $5000 NZD would be awarded on submission of the final project proposal (in response to feedback from the judging panel) and confirmation of approval for project implementation from the respective Ministry of Health.

The intended timeframe for project implementation was 6 months, with the final project report due in September 2018. To incentivise project implementation and completion, representatives from the two teams most successful in implementing their planned projects were to be given the opportunity to attend and present at the University of Otago Pacific International Health Symposium in Dunedin, New Zealand, in November 2018.

Delays in project implementation were encountered for various reasons, including in-country Ministry of Health approval processes, unexpected delays in transferring funds to participant countries, and environmental factors. In two cases, project work was stalled by severe weather events in the form of Tropical Cyclones (TCs) Gita and Josie in the early months of 2018.

Responding to the impact of these TCs and subsequent outbreaks of mosquito-borne diseases was a manifest priority over non-essential project work. Small projects with limited budgets may detract from core objectives and tasks and create additional workload for those tasked with project implementation. These two cases serve to illustrate the challenges of imposing restricted timeframes on project work in the context of the South Pacific.

Observations around best processes for supporting project implementation in PICs

1. Timeframe: Delays in project implementation should be anticipated and timeframes must be realistic and / or
flexible. Planning for events and activities that involve Pacific Island countries should take account of the potential impact of significant weather events, particularly during the cyclone season which begins on 1 November and continues until 30 April.\textsuperscript{7}

With Climate change playing an increasing role in the frequency and severity of significant weather events and the many pathways by which climate change impacts on health, the need to take account of this factor in any event planning is paramount and timelines for project implementation must be suitably flexible.\textsuperscript{8}

2 Staff capacity and workflow: Allocation of project funding, such as the small grants awarded as part of TechCamp, should be undertaken with due consideration for the potential impact on staff workload, alignment with organizational objectives/priorities, and ability to sustain project outcomes over the longer-term.

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<th>Stage of Event Planning</th>
<th>Recommended Approaches</th>
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| Event planning          | Roles and responsibilities | Clear delineation and designation of roles and responsibilities between partner organisations.  
|                         |                          | Clear lines of communication among team members.  
|                         | Information sharing and accountability | Good mechanisms for effective and efficient information sharing, including regular meeting schedules and documented meeting outcomes / actions with timely reviews.  
|                         | Event objectives | Mutually-agreed and clearly documented outcomes. Consider strategic objectives associated with funding source(s).  
|                         | Expert input | Engage individuals with relevant expertise (including sensitivity and competence in the Pacific cultural context), e.g., in advisory capacity.  
| Participant recruitment | Level of engagement | Initial approach targeted to highest appropriate level of relevant PIC government agency/department.  
|                         | Approach | Phone calls to Ministries of Health (or relevant agencies) to confirm names and email addresses of intended recipients. Local partners may provide assistance, e.g., NZ High Commission, SPC.  
|                         |                          | Request participant information using a well-designed electronic template, including passport details if needed for travel bookings.  
|                         |                          | Correspondence should address potential barriers to participation, e.g., costs associated with participant travel.  
|                         | Timeframe | Allow adequate time for participant identification, anticipating delays, e.g., due to competing in-country priorities, internet access issues, authorization from superiors etc.  

Follow-on Activities

Representatives from six PICs represented at TechCamp New Zealand were invited to attend the recent Pacific International Health Symposium held in Dunedin, New Zealand. Bringing together members of the original TechCamp project teams provided an excellent opportunity to support the implementation of projects developed at TechCamp New Zealand and more generally, to strengthen regional collaboration, share knowledge and resources, and encourage ongoing engagement amongst key personnel in the efforts to improve vector-borne disease control in the Pacific region.

Support from the U.S. Consulate General New Zealand enabled one of the original TechCamp trainers to attend and provide a comprehensive workshop to upskill participants on the use of a free vector surveillance app developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CSC) \textsuperscript{9} that a number of PICs are now starting to implement, including a planned national rollout in one country.
| **Visa requirements** *(Where applicable)* | Ensure participants are aware of necessary visa requirements and provide information, including visa category and link to application form etc.  
Provide formal Letter of Invitation (or equivalent) as supporting document for visa application.  
Direct participants to seek guidance from relevant Government personnel and / or NZ High Commission in home country.  
Ensure adequate time is allowed for visa processing (as per host country’s immigration website), including a buffer period of 2 weeks or more. |
|---|---|
| **Workshop design** | **Tailored solutions**  
Workshop content should be informed by local needs and available resources in participants’ home countries, including with respect to technological tools and solutions. |
| **Research and capacity building** | Seek and implement opportunities for collaborative research and information-sharing. |
| **Supporting project implementation in PICs** | **Timeframe**  
Anticipate delays in project implementation and ensure timeframes are realistic and flexible.  
Take account of potential impact of significant weather events, especially during the cyclone season (1 November – 30 April).  
**Staff capacity and workflow**  
Give consideration to potential impact of projects on staff workload and workflow.  
Seek to build on existing initiatives or align projects with existing objectives/priorities.  
Consider sustainability of project outcomes. |
| **Follow-on activities** | **Continued engagement**  
Identify and create opportunities to support PICs in their adoption / implementation of new technologies or other solutions, e.g., additional training, technical support, information sharing, resourcing.  
**Networking**  
Encourage and facilitate the development of local and regional networks using context-appropriate tools for promoting communication and collaboration.  
Take an active approach to promoting and supporting local and regional networking efforts during face-to-face events.  
**Local champions**  
Seek to identify, support and acknowledge individuals with the ability and willingness to champion efforts in their home country / regionally. |

**Observations around best processes for follow-on activities:**

1. **Continued engagement:** In order for initiatives and events to have sustainable impact, it is important to consider ongoing opportunities to support PICs in their adoption and use of technologies (or other tools) to address context-specific requirements. For example, by providing opportunities for: additional training, technical support, information sharing, and additional resourcing.

2. **Networking:** Encouraging and facilitating the development of local and regional networks is important for building local and regional capacity. Potential barriers to user engagement should inform the selection of online tools for promoting communication and collaboration and preference should be given to widely-used networking tools in the Pacific regional context, e.g., WhatsApp. In some instances, email lists may be the most appropriate option. Face-to-face follow-on activities and engagement provide the opportunity to strengthen existing networks.
and ideally, time should be set aside to facilitate networking.

3. **Local “champions”:** There is enormous value with respect to capacity building and ensuring sustainability of outcomes in identifying and supporting individuals with the ability and willingness to champion efforts to implement initiatives, in their home country and across the Pacific region. Efforts to support and acknowledge the role of these local champions are encouraged.

**CONCLUSION**

With growing health challenges affecting the Pacific region as a whole, there is a need for a collective approach to addressing priority issues, including the spread of vector-borne diseases. These collective approaches need to fit within the context of the PICs involved and require specific organisational and logistical approaches. The design and implementation of initiatives and events like TechCamp New Zealand must be responsive to the diverse cultures and contexts of the Pacific region if they are to lead to beneficial sustainable outcomes. In this paper, we have provided an example of how Va’a o Tautai approached the delivery of TechCamp New Zealand with the aim of providing a resource for organisations delivering similar initiatives and events intended to support improved health and well-being outcomes in the Pacific region.

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**Conflicts of Interest:** No conflicts of interest.

**REFERENCES**


3. For more information on the specific objectives of TechCamp New Zealand, see: [https://techcamp-nz.squarespace.com/](https://techcamp-nz.squarespace.com/)


