COMMENTARY

Services for people with communication disability in Fiji: barriers and drivers of change

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ABSTRACT

Context: The World Health Organization’s World report on disability calls upon all nations to ‘remove the barriers which prevent [people with disabilities] from participating in their communities; getting a quality education, finding decent work, and having their voices heard’ (p. 5). People with communication disability (PWCD), as a consequence of their atypical communication, may be more likely to be excluded from society, and denied their basic human rights, than other people with disability. Fiji, a multicultural and multilingual nation in the south-western Pacific Ocean, has limited services for PWCD. Service providers in Fiji include disability care workers, special education teachers, traditional healers, and a small number of visiting volunteer speech-language pathologists. This paper outlines the historical and current barriers to, and drivers of change for, service development for PWCD in Fiji.

Issues: Five barriers to service development for PWCD in Fiji were identified. (1) A major structural barrier is the small population size to develop appropriate infrastructure including professional education programs. (2) Geographical barriers include the dispersed geography across 300 islands, low population density, the rural–urban divide, and risk of disaster from cyclones and flooding. (3) Linguistic diversity, while culturally important, can present a barrier to the provision of quality services that are available in the languages spoken by PWCD. (4) Cultural barriers include historical political instability, although Fiji has become more stable due to the recent democratic elections. The social climate affects development of services that are appropriate for different dominant cultural groups. (5) Financial barriers include low gross domestic product, low financial security and low human development index; however, the financial outlook for Fiji is steadily improving due to the change in political stability.

Lessons learned: Three levels of drivers of change were identified. Macro-level drivers included Fiji’s endorsement of international policy and increased globalisation (eg tourism). Meso-level drivers of change included receipt of foreign aid and support from international non-government organisations, development of disability-inclusive legislation and policy within Fiji, and strengthening of government policies that support disabled people’s organisations. Micro-level drivers of change included
establishment of disabled people’s organisations by consumers, adoption of disability-inclusive policy and procedures by service providers, and changes in the perceptions of disability within the general community. Fijian prevalence data confirms that there is an underserved population of PWCD in need of specialist services. Significant advocacy work in the disability field by Fijian and international disabled people’s organisations has led to the Fiji government signing international policy (eg Convention on the Rights of Peoples with Disabilities), inclusion of disability rights in national legislation (eg 2013 Constitution of Fiji Islands) and localised policy and practice documentation (eg inclusive education policy by the Fiji Islands Ministry of Education). Continued service development is required if Fijians with communication disability are to have their needs met. The drivers of change at all levels are positioned well to overcome current barriers to change; however, a coordinated approach including macro-, meso-, and micro-level drivers is required to ensure the future development of adequate services for PWCD in Fiji.

**Key words:** agents of change, barriers and drivers of change, communication disability, Fiji, service development, speech-language pathology.

**Context**

Fiji is a group of more than 300 islands in the south-western Pacific Ocean. Fiji’s strategic place in the regional economy, historical immigration patterns and rich cultural mix contribute to this small country a remarkable degree of cultural and linguistic diversity. Fiji’s population of more than 800,000 is from mixed ethnic backgrounds: 57% indigenous iTaukei-Fijian, 37% Fijian-Indian, with Indian subcontinent ancestry, and 6% of either Pacific island, European or East Asian ancestry¹.

Information about people with communication disability (PWCD) in Fiji is scarce, with prevalence of Fijians with communication disability reported in two public documents. The first, a 2010 survey by the Fiji National Council for Disabled Persons (FNCDP), reports that less than 1% of Fijians with a disability have a communication disability (approximately 1.4% of the total population)². The second report, from the Fiji Islands Ministry of Education, National Heritage, Culture and Arts, states that 39.2% of children enrolled in special schools have a ‘speech disability’ (p. 27)³. This latter figure is closely aligned with international expectations from other majority world countries; for example, Wylie and colleagues indicate 25–49% of all African people with disability experience communication disability⁴.

Services for PWCD in Fiji are limited. Hopf reviewed agents of service delivery for PWCD in Fiji and found a small number of qualified speech-language pathologists (SLPs) had visited Fiji in the past 25 years as volunteers predominantly providing one-to-one intervention and ad-hoc paraprofessional training to parents and teachers⁵. Additionally, there was evidence of alternative service providers (eg traditional healers, mid-tier workers, disability care workers) with a largely unknown skill base and methods of intervention. Pressman and Heah Lee also explored service provision for PWCD in Fiji⁶. In the absence of in-country speech-language pathology services in Fiji, the authors recommended the use of paraprofessionals trained by SLPs and audiologists. Such a recommendation resonates with current international trends promoting the use of community-based rehabilitation (CBR) workers and population-based approaches to the provision of health services⁷. Unfortunately, the Pressman and Heah Lee⁶ recommendation from 25 years ago to provide long-term paraprofessional training in Fiji has not been realised⁸. Currently, there are no speech-language pathology professional preparation courses in Fiji, despite the development of courses for other allied health services offered through the Fiji National University (eg physiotherapy, pharmacy and dietetics)⁹, and speech-language pathology courses in countries surrounding the region (eg Australia, Guam, Hawaii, New Zealand)⁹.
SLPs from around the world have long been concerned about the mismatch between service delivery accessibility and availability and the needs of PWCD. These authors, and others, persistently challenge SLPs to engage in an ongoing discussion of service delivery re-evaluation to ensure SLPs are proactive in meeting the needs of PWCD. However, as Cheng illustrates in her summary of services in the Asia-Pacific region, speech-language pathology growth remains disparate, with the needs of PWCD remaining unmet in many Asia-Pacific nations due to the influence of country-specific sociopolitical, geographical, cultural and linguistic factors.

The aim of this article is to describe the barriers to development of services for PWCD in Fiji and to document the macro-, meso-, micro-level drivers of change as potentially facilitative for future service development in Fiji.

**Issues**

Consideration of the barriers and drivers to change for service development was recommended by Price. Use of this terminology has consequently been applied in development of services in majority world contexts for people with disability and specifically people with communication disability. An overview of the barriers and drivers to change for Fiji, based on the recommendations of Wylie and colleagues, is provided in Table 1 and will be described below.

**Barriers to development of services for PWCD in Fiji**

Five barriers to the development of services for PWCD were identified by Wylie and colleagues: structural, geographical, linguistic, cultural and financial. These barriers were applied to the Fijian context following a review of available literature including international and Fijian legislation, policy and practice documents.

**Structural barriers:** The Fiji 2007 census revealed a small multicultural population of less than 900,000 people. In comparison with other middle-income majority world countries that have begun to develop services for PWCD, Fiji has a small and diverse population, which potentially restricts the scope and availability of resources (eg financial and human resources, tertiary education).

**Geographical barriers:** Fiji’s more than 300 islands are spread over a distance of 18,271 km. The 100 inhabited islands of Fiji have a relatively low population density of 47.1 people per km². However, a little over half of all Fijians actually live in major urban centres, where the bulk of paid employment is found. Specialist health and education services for Fiji tend to be located in the capital city or other major urban centres. The need for Fijians to travel long distances at significant personal cost may be considered a barrier to accessing service provision. Disaster risk is also a potential barrier to development of Fijian services and infrastructure.

**Linguistic barriers:** Fiji has three official languages: English, Fijian and Hindustani and significant numbers of speakers of Fiji Hindi, other non-standard indigenous Fijian languages (eg Lauan), Rotuman, immigrant languages (eg Chinese) and Fijian sign language. In urban areas and in the domains of education, politics and industry, Fiji English is the language that dominates. Due to linguistic diversity there is often a mismatch between home language and the vernacular taught in schools. There may also be a linguistic mismatch between PWCD seeking services and the language of the service providers.

**Cultural barriers:** Fiji has experienced political instability in the form of three political coup d’etats, in 1987, 2000 and 2006. Military rule was in place from 2006 until democratic elections were held in September 2014. It is envisioned that democracy will bring in a new period of political stability. The new government was elected on a platform of racial equality. This should have an impact on the social climate that has historically been hampered by conflict amongst the two dominant ethnic groups: iTaukei Fijian and Fijian Indian.
Table 1: Barriers and drivers of change to support people with communication disability in Fiji

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Barriers to change</th>
<th>Structural</th>
<th>1. Population size</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Linguistic</td>
<td>1. Linguistic diversity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cultural</td>
<td>1. Political stability, 2. Social climate</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Drivers of change</th>
<th>Macro-level</th>
<th>1. Endorsement of international policy, 2. Increased globalisation</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Meso-level</td>
<td>1. Receipt of foreign aid and support from international NGOs, 2. Development of disability inclusive legislation and policy, 3. Strengthening of government policies that support DPOs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Micro-level</td>
<td>1. Establishment of DPOs by consumer representatives, 2. Adoption of disability inclusive policy and procedures by service providers, 3. Perceptions of disability within the general community</td>
</tr>
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</table>

NGO, non-government organisation. DPO, disabled people’s organisations.

Financial barriers: Fiji has experienced small but steady growth on the human development index (HDI) since 1980\(^24\). For example, in 1980 Fiji had a HDI of 0.587, in 2000 Fiji had a HDI of 0.674, and in 2014 the HDI was 0.724, and was ranked 88th in the world. The gross domestic product (GDP) per capita in 2014 was $7552.21\(^24\). Fiji’s financial security, as ranked by Moody’s, is considered B1 stable\(^25\). The economy has been consistently "hampered by persistent trade and budget deficits, making it one of the world’s largest per capita recipients of aid"\(^26\).

Fiji’s small population, slow growth performance in improving human development, recent history of political instability, high risk of disaster and perceived financial insecurity in international markets are key barriers to the development of services for PWCD in Fiji. With a return to democracy in Fiji from September 2014, concerns of political instability and financial insecurity may be partially alleviated in the future.

Drivers of development of services for PWCD in Fiji

In Fiji, a range of drivers of change are potentially facilitative for future service development in Fiji. Price identified three potential levels of change: macro-, meso- and micro-level. Macro-level changes are disability policy drivers that are deemed external and distant from an organisation (eg international conventions)\(^16\). Meso-level changes also act from an external point but are deemed close to the organisation (eg government policy). Micro-level changes are internal to the organisation, and thus by design are also close (eg staff member opinion, company guidelines). Using this framework, available literature, including legislation, policies and practices pertaining to communication disability in Fiji, was reviewed, and policy drivers at all levels were identified.

Macro-level drivers of change: At the macro-level there are two significant drivers. The first of these is Fiji’s active involvement in international policy development and resultant targets to achieve on behalf of all people living with a disability as a result of its membership in international human rights groups and signatory status to international frameworks and mandates. For example:


Meso-level drivers of change: Considering the meso-level drivers of policy development, three powerful contributors to change are evident. First, foreign aid and international non-government organisations contribute a small amount to Fiji’s national budget; it remains important in some ministerial portfolios as a backup to budget shortfalls. Foreign aid agencies in Fiji have traditionally come from Australia, Canada, Japan, New Zealand and the UN. Within these countries and organisations, there is an increasing emphasis upon disability and quality-of-life issues, mandated under article 32 of the UNCRPD, which has led to development of disability-inclusive international development assistance programs. One example, the Disability-Inclusive Development Reference Group, has been effective in facilitating exchange of information between non-government organisations, Fijian disabled people’s organisations and international equivalents. They have also been critical in improving awareness of the CRPD and the social model approach to disability. In addition, international policy and strategies (eg Development for All Strategy) have given legitimacy to required Fijian legislative changes and budgetary allocations.

Government legislation and policy is the second meso-level driver. As stated in the macro-level discussion, Fiji’s government has committed to international mandates for improving the lives of people living with a disability. Importantly, these commitments have been translated into meso-level action within the policy and procedure documents of major governmental ministries. In addition, the government established the Fiji National Council for Disabled Persons (FNCDP) in 1994. The FNCDP observes a human rights model of disability. They are responsible for policy development and coordination of disability services across ministerial portfolios and monitoring of groups of people with disability in Fiji. The FNCDP 2008–2018 National Policy on Persons Living with Disability clearly supports provision of specialist services for people living with a disability. In addition to recognition of the need for capacity building it calls specifically for ‘strengthen[ed]…capacity of [community-based rehabilitation] officers, and other professionals (e.g., speech therapists, sign language

The second macro-level driver relates to increasing globalisation of world concepts, through international tourism, multimedia and information and communications technology. Fijians consequently have a greater chance of having contact with people from other countries (eg as a tourist travelling internationally, a recipient of a service provided by an international volunteer or a participant in an online community). These contacts provide opportunities for the sharing of new thinking, techniques and ideologies that subsequently influence future policy development. An example of international practice influencing Fijian practice is the development of the Pacific Open Learning Health Net. Developed in consultation with WHO, it offers free web-based learning modules for healthcare workers. It is supported by 38 learning centres located in 12 Pacific Island countries. Information for these courses is sourced from around the world.
interpreters, occupational therapists, etc.‘)(p. 15). Such policy development is indicative of Fiji’s concerted attempts to close the ‘implementation gap’ that has previously existed between legislative adoption of disability-inclusive policies and ground-level implementation of those policies. Such a gap is reportedly present in other majority world countries and considered a major barrier to change17,18.

The other meso-level driver is the strengthening of Fijian government policies that support disabled people’s organisations. Fiji is a member of regional organisations with an interest in the welfare of people with disabilities. Key agencies include the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat and the Pacific Disability Forum. Both agency websites provide links to local and international agencies with an interest in disability services in Fiji. As a member of such forums, Fiji has subscribed to their philosophies and has developed policy in accordance with their recommendations.

Micro-level drivers of change: The micro-level drivers of change can be viewed from three perspectives: that of consumer representatives, service providers and the general community. With regards to consumer representatives, Fiji has a strong and committed network of disabled people’s organisations supported by the national Fiji Disabled Persons Federation (previously Fiji Disabled Persons Association). Importantly for PWCD in Fiji, Fijian disabled people’s organisations are committed to ‘including people with all types of impairments’(p. 60)41.

Service providers for PWCD in Fiji include people within the health and education sectors. Both sectors are in the early stages of adopting disability-inclusive practices within their own plans, policies and procedures. Prior to school entry, services for Fijian children with speech, language and literacy difficulties are the responsibility of the Fijian Ministry of Health. The ministry coordinates more than 900 village clinics, 1245 nursing stations, three area hospitals, 76 health centres, 19 subdivisional medical centres, three divisional hospitals, and three specialty hospitals with tuberculosis, leprosy and medical rehabilitation units42. Provision of specialist rehabilitation services for PWCD is not presently a primary goal of the ministry; their focus is on reducing child mortality rates40. Speech-language pathology services are not currently available to support children prior to school entry, nor at any time for adults who have acquired communication and/or swallowing difficulties.

Support for children with speech, language and literacy needs during the school years is provided by the Fijian Ministry of Education. Historically, children in Fiji who are identified with additional needs are educated in one of 19 segregated schools, referred to locally as ‘special schools’. Tavola states that ‘segregated schools mostly have mixed disability and mixed age enrolments and offer primary schooling of a very limited quality and with poor educational outcomes. Some are more care centres than schools.’ (p. 7)43. In addition, Tavola reports that ‘the majority of children living in rural, remote and scattered islands [with additional needs] have typically not attended school at all’ (p. 7)43. The Fiji Islands Ministry of Education developed the Policy in Effective Implementation of Inclusive Education in Fiji associations (eg Fiji Physiotherapy Association), and section 7 contains a wish to use 'speech therapists' (p. 11)44. Fijian special education teachers actively seek professional development opportunities locally and internationally3. Furthermore, in 2013, recruitment for special education needs coordinators in all education districts commenced to support the implementation of country-wide inclusive schools3.

Professional organisations in Fiji with an interest in supporting PWCD may include teachers’ unions and health workers’ unions. Data on staff perceptions of working with people with a disability or specifically PWCD is limited to the field of education45. Daveta found that teachers from different school settings supported inclusive education for children with mild disabilities only and indicated that children with severe disabilities should attend a special school45. These teachers identified several factors that ultimately acted as barriers to inclusion: severity and type of disability, perceived extra workload, inadequate pre- or in-service training, a lack of specialist teacher support, a lack of government funding, a lack of commitment from the Ministry of Education, and lack of consultation with teachers on development of inclusive
policy or curriculum\textsuperscript{45}. Reflecting similar findings of international research in this area\textsuperscript{46}, Daveta’s findings are important to consider given the recent trial of mainstream schooling children with disabilities by the Fijian Ministry of Education\textsuperscript{38}.

The other driver at the micro-level relates to community expectations. There is limited information about Fijians’ expectations for services for PWCD. The information provided by teachers as already discussed\textsuperscript{45} and general comments on community perceptions of disability in review documents\textsuperscript{38} suggest community expectations for PWCD may be low. It is possible that community expectations may currently be acting as a barrier to policy development, rather than a driver.

Lessons learned

Much has happened in Fiji over the past 25 years with respect to financial and political stability and growth, and macro- and meso-level drivers of change. However, not enough change has happened for PWCD in Fiji. Prevalence data confirms that there is a population of PWCD in need of services, yet services remain minimal and PWCD remain underserved. Fijian community organisations (eg Fiji Disabled Peoples Association and their affiliates) and government portfolios (eg FNCDP, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Social Welfare) have made positive steps towards service development for PWCD, including:

\begin{itemize}
  \item adopting a human rights approach to disability and signatory status to the UNCRPD
  \item improving community awareness of disability issues
  \item facilitating disability-inclusive government and ministry policies (eg for inclusive education)
  \item recognising the need for specialist services in other allied health disciplines (eg dietetics and physiotherapy)
  \item conducting epidemiological research into disability prevalence
  \item committing to a ‘knowledgeable Fiji’ through extensive investment in information and communications technology\textsuperscript{47}
  \item maximising the limited speech-language pathology services that are available to date, especially with regards to capacity building
  \item undertaking risk reduction activities to reduce the impact of natural and economic calamities
  \item returning to democratic governance.
\end{itemize}

Unfortunately, local development of services for PWCD has not been a priority for Fiji. The national health system has prioritised primary health care and preventative services, focusing on poverty reduction, prevention of non-communicable and infectious disease, improving sanitation, and health system efficiency. These are erstwhile areas of intervention, though such priorities are at the expense of providing rehabilitation services for people already with disability.

The analysis presented highlights the opposing forces at work in developing services for PWCD in Fiji. Whilst progress has been made in many areas of disability development, change for PWCD remains static. The exact reasons for this are not obvious. Buell states that ‘addressing any one demand or supply barrier in isolation will not engender sustainable change within a service or improve access for service users … change requires energies to be directed across sectors’ (p. 35)\textsuperscript{11}. In Fiji, it is possible that forces driving change are not working collectively due to the ad-hoc and intermittent supply of specialist knowledge about communication disability in Fiji. The authors suggest that, as per Buell’s recommendation, Fiji requires a coordinated approach that combines the driving forces at all levels of Fijian society before true momentum for change to services for Fijian PWCD is achieved.

Individuals and organisations need to capitalise on these gains for people with disabilities to ensure that services for PWCD are significantly enhanced. A coordinated approach to service development for PWCD from education, health, and private sectors is required to sustain change. Most importantly,
sustainable change will need to be driven from within the Fijian community and informed by the knowledge of PWCD in Fiji, their supporters and current service delivery agents.

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