

Connecting Urban and Rural Learning Initiatives – PASCAL Learning Cities Network (LCN)

Learning for Change: Social Learning and Innovation in the Fiji Landcare LIFE Project

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Video link <https://youtu.be/dxDSEwKsoqg>

Executive Summary

Overview

- The Fiji Landcare LIFE Project is a **six-year, tri-country research and development initiative** (Fiji, Philippines, Australia) funded by the **Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR)**.
- Its overarching objective is to **strengthen smallholder farmer livelihoods in Fiji** through sustainable food and fibre production, improved natural resource management, and **collaborative learning systems**.
- The project adapts and localises lessons from an earlier **eight-year Landcare project in the Philippines**, with a strong emphasis on **adaptation rather than adoption**.

Strategic Approach

- Moves away from traditional, top-down agricultural extension models toward a **systems-oriented and learning-centred approach**.
- Integrates:
 - Agricultural productivity
 - Natural resource management
 - Human and institutional capacity building
- Positions **learning as the central driver of development**, rather than a secondary support activity.

Core Learning Model

- **Social learning** is the foundation of the project, defined as learning that emerges through:
 - Interaction, dialogue, observation, and shared experience

- Participation of farmers, researchers, extension officers, policymakers, educators, NGOs, and ministries
- All participants are treated as **co-learners**, which:
 - Breaks down expert–end-user hierarchies
 - Builds mutual respect, trust, and shared ownership of outcomes

Key Learning Processes in Practice

- **Experiential learning:**
 - Farmer-to-farmer visits
 - Cross-site exchanges
 - International study tours (Fiji ↔ Philippines), deliberately mixing farmers, policymakers, researchers, and extension staff
- **Collective reflection:**
 - Structured group discussions to analyse successes, failures, and assumptions
 - Builds critical thinking and shared sense-making
- **Experimentation and adaptation:**
 - Farmers trial and modify practices to suit local ecological and cultural conditions
- **Digital knowledge sharing:**
 - Farmer-initiated platforms (e.g. Viber groups) enable real-time exchange of photos, techniques, and advice
 - Extends learning beyond face-to-face engagement
- **Non-formal and flexible learning:**
 - Aligned with cultural practices, family structures, and time constraints

Collaboration and Trust as Enablers

- Strong **multi-sector collaboration** across government ministries, research institutions, NGOs, and communities.
- Trust is treated as a **deliberate investment**, built through:
 - Repeated interaction
 - Informal social engagement
 - Shared meals and cultural practices
- Innovation is understood as a **social process**, not simply the uptake of new technologies.

Outcomes and Impact

- The most significant impacts are **relational and capacity-based**, rather than solely technical:
 - Improved skills in observation, reflection, and adaptive problem-solving
 - Increased farmer confidence to question assumptions and experiment
 - Stronger, enduring networks across farmers, researchers, and extension systems
- Learning outcomes are explicitly designed as **legacy capabilities** that persist beyond the project lifecycle.

Climate Change and Resilience

- Climate change is a major contextual driver of learning, with farmers experiencing:

- Increased cyclones, flooding, drought, and soil erosion
- Downstream impacts on reefs, fisheries, health, and nutrition
- Learning focuses on **risk management strategies**, crop diversification, soil conservation, and system resilience, supported by cross-ministry collaboration (agriculture, forestry, health, meteorology).

Equity, Culture, and Community

- Strong recognition of:
 - **Cultural and spiritual connections to land and sea** (e.g. *Vanua* in Fiji)
 - Family-based and intergenerational farming systems
 - Gendered but complementary roles of women and men in agriculture
- Emergence of **Junior Landcare initiatives** in primary schools reflects deep community ownership of the model.

Institutional Capacity Building

- While farmers prioritise practical, usable knowledge over formal qualifications:
 - **Extension officers and institutions benefit from structured capacity building**
 - Universities are engaged through Masters and PhD projects linked directly to farming communities
- Addresses historically siloed institutional systems by fostering cross-sector and cross-generational networks.

Key Takeaway for Policy and Practice

- The Fiji Landcare LIFE Project demonstrates that **sustainable agricultural development is fundamentally a learning process**.
- Investing in **social learning, trust, collaboration, and adaptive capacity** produces more durable and systemic change than technical interventions alone.
- Learning should be treated as **core infrastructure** for rural resilience, climate adaptation, and community wellbeing—both in rural and urban-rural connected contexts.