

Community-Based Materials Development in the South Pacific

by *Dianne Goodwillie*

Towards the 1980s, women in the South Pacific region called for culturally sensitive, attractive nutrition teaching aids. Through a series of planned and sometimes chaotic events, a set of thirteen nutrition education books has been produced dealing with food and diseases, food preservation, fitness, gardening, budgeting, developing training materials, and individual food needs of family members.

Using local expertise

The unusual aspect of this project was the way the books were created. A choice was made early in the project to use Pacific Island expertise to write the books even though nutritionists had no specific training in producing publications and were heavily engaged in their own day-to-day work. Another important decision was made to expand the writing group to health educators, home economics teachers, agricultural workers and community workers. Since the books were aimed at a broad cross section of community leaders, different viewpoints were needed, not just the ideas of nutritionists or dietitians.

Over 70 Pacific Islanders (mostly women) from nineteen countries were involved in

writing, illustrating and supervising the field testing of the books. The involvement of so many people in developing the materials provided an opportunity for ongoing learning to take place compared to the more usual practice of experts preparing materials.

Dietitians and nurses surprised themselves and their supervisors with the attractive and practical books they produced. Teachers, nurses, agricultural workers and nutritionists found they had different skills and insights to learn from each other which gave added dimensions to the books. For example, a curriculum specialist added short self-test to her book. A nurse who was skeptical about "boring nutrition education materials", made up a tongue-in-cheek story called "how to kill your husband" - in the story the husband is given unhealthy foods and has a poor lifestyle.



J. Uluinaceva

Materials production process

Participants also learned about producing materials. This included writing clearly without jargon, doing field testing, using illustrations and drawings that are clear to the community and the importance of attractive design. These were important new skills learned by the participants but they were not anticipated outcomes of the project.

While reviewing materials, many questions came up concerning the use in the Pacific Islands of specific English terms and definitions of nutrition terms used: for example, agreeing to a definition of overweight or whether to consider an alcoholic drink of no nutritional value when in fact it contains calories. Some of these questions result from former links with American, British and Australian programs for nutrition education. Since a baseline of information for the Pacific had never before been written, this was the first time these issues were tackled.

Very few people in the project had experience with the use of computers and in the late 1980s, desktop publishing was unknown in the Pacific Islands. Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, Canada assisted with the design of

the publications and taught skills and shortcuts in word processing which greatly reduced the time taken for editing and re-editing manuscripts. Staff exchanges between Canada and the Pacific aided in the training and also helped bring cultural gaps; however, communication difficulties emerged between the South Pacific and Canada. Sending materials between Fiji (where the project was administered) and Vancouver, Canada created serious delays and frustrations when trying to clarify drawings or spellings or culturally sensitive information.

Benefits for the participants

Now that the books are published, the Pacific Islanders who participated in the projects have continued to be active in using and promoting the books. Because the participants were not only health professionals, different groups are using the books in unexpected ways. For example, nutrition books are used for English classes at the Tarawa Technical Institute, Kiribati. In the Cook Islands, home economics teachers are using some of the books in their classrooms. The South Pacific Regional Community Education Training Center revised their food, nutrition and community development curriculum using the nutrition books as a basic text. In Vanuatu, the books were the basis for a reference book for nonformal education centers and the Red Cross in Fiji has reproduced materials from the books on cancer and other diseases for health and first aid community education.

About the author: *Dianne Goodwillie* coordinated the South Pacific Community Nutrition Training Project and co-edited the series with Sitaleki Finau. She has worked on women's leadership and community development projects in the South Pacific for fifteen years.

Source: *Mothers & Children, Bulletin on Infant Feeding and Maternal Nutrition*, Vol. II, No. 3, 1992