



# **Self-advocating for rights, one poem at a time:**

**Experiences of archiving Luke Taveta's poems by Psychiatric  
Survivors' Association with the help of TCI DPO support grant**



# Self-advocating for rights, one poem at a time:

*Experiences of archiving Luke Taveta's poems by Psychiatric Survivors' Association  
with the help of TCI DPO support grant*

## Setting the context

**“My name is Sera Osbourne.** I am thirty-three years old. I am married with three kids. I am a person with psychosocial disability here in Fiji. I have been with PSA for the past 6-7 years. I got to know about PSA through my brother. He is a person using a wheelchair. He is also a person with a disability. He was working on a project with the Spinal Injury Association and I used to be his personal assistant. When we started going to the office of Spinal injury association, its office was right next to PSA. That's where I got to know about PSA. I started speaking to Clara Taveta, who was then already a part of PSA. Ever since, I became active, starting off as a volunteer for five days a week for two to three years. And then that's where I got most of my the knowledge I have and all that I know now. That's the first three years of volunteering, even though I was not getting any money. But it paid back in a way where I learned so much and which gave me the confidence to even stand up during our AGM and having that confidence to want to be part of the board. And then right after, I was elected to be one of the board members, then I think after one or two years, I was asked to step down and take up the role of the project officer for PSA. And ever since, I've been holding that position till date.”

## History of PSA

**“PSA was** founded back in 2004. It was founded by a group of persons with psychosocial disability who were then still admitted at the psychiatric hospital. As I mentioned that here in Fiji, we only have a psychiatric hospital, St. Giles. And so this group of persons with psychosocial disabilities, one of them was Luke Taveta, it started off. They would have small prayer groups within the facility, while they were admitted. And then from that small group, they had this idea. It inspired them to start up a group or a movement that can be a voice of persons with psychosocial disability here in Fiji. And ever since they came into contact with the disability movement, they joined. They were given a space back then, where there used to be an office, an office that housed all the disability representatives. They were a part of that from the beginning. And then that's how it started before we got an office at the National

Council for Persons with Disability Complex. And ever since, they had focused on recruiting members.”

“At PSA, we have two types of membership. One is regular membership. These are persons with psychosocial disability, people who are diagnosed with a mental illness or going through some sort of mental health problems. And the other membership, which we call the associate membership. This one is open to everyone as long as they have the same vision and mission as PSA to improve the lives of persons with psychosocial disability and those who are passionate to work in this field of supporting persons with psychosocial disability. They are most welcome to join in as a member, but as an associate member. But in terms of our structure, we have our board and then we have the secretariat, so board members, they need to be all persons with a psychosocial disability. So it's 100 percent for people who are members, and who can become board members. They should have been members of PSA for more than three years, and they are persons with psychosocial disability and then we have the Secretariat.”

## Sera's work profile

**“W**hat's my work for PSA? It has been broad. I don't focus only on a specific thematic area being the project officer. So, mainly my job is to write proposals, I come up with activities after a group discussion with the team in the office, as well as gathering stories from our members and also consulting our members. For example, on the last Thursday of every month, we have a 'telling all' session and this is where we get to know what the members are going through. It's a platform where they share their experiences with each other, coping mechanisms. Also it's a platform that they use to understand, more about the nature of the kind of psychosocial disability that they have. And that's where we pick up. Or that's how activities are born, it is born from listening to members, listening to their needs and discussing with the team in the office how well we can put together a proposal- that includes those activities. It may not really help them directly, but more of a long term benefit for the members. Maybe it's an activity that helps improve the lives of persons with psychosocial disability. It's more like providing the appropriate support to our members. And under this, we have awareness happening in the communities, like community outreach awareness.”

“.....We do mental health training whereby in Fiji, we are still behind. I must say the stigma around mental health is still for us the biggest and the greatest challenge that we face, which causes us not to be included. This is a contributing factor to why most of us are still victims of physical abuse or the different forms of abuse. And therefore, for us, there's still a need to

educate the society here in Fiji on understanding what mental health is and what mental illness is and what to expect and how to be around them. And apart from the awareness that we have going on, awareness is not only to the community, but as well as to others- persons with disability organizations, the Fiji Police Force and other social workers, other network partners. Apart from awareness, we also have our peer to peer support. We have it on a face to face basis or on a telephone call basis. We also assist our members to access the help that is provided by the government through different Ministries. And when I say that, we do not only help them, we support them in terms of getting the forms filled out for them if they have problems in terms of filling out the form or taking it from Point A to B, helping them with their birth certificates and downloading it, lodging the forms and everything until they successfully start receiving the assistance.”

“.....And also we support our members or assist our members when members come into contact with the law. And mostly it's me who does that. I am sharing the work that I'm currently doing. So, when our members come into contact with the law, then whether they are perpetrators or whether they are victims, I am there to ensure their rights are not violated, that they are provided with the reasonable accommodation that needs to be provided to them. And also, I see to it that that our members are informed of certain processes. And because mostly we still have a handful of members, like a large number of members who do not have the support from their families and carers. So we are thankful that they have an organization like PSA that steps in or steps up to take that position of being a parent to them or carer in times of need. And apart from that, I am always on standby. I accompany members to the hospital when they are unwell. We are still more medical. And so and because we only have one, that's I think the only remedy that we have here.”

“Most of us banked on medical support. When one of the members become unwell, whether it's a two hours' drive or three hours' drive, PSA has always been there to accompany or pick up our members, drop them off. Like I said, like most of them do not have the support from families and carers and also we have our income generating skills. Mostly, this is focused on women to build their capacity in all aspects financially as well as becoming independent. And we have involved some men as well in this program. And apart from that, we were supported by TCI during COVID, whereby we provided our members with farming tools and farming toolkits, seedlings and food rations addressing integrated needs, which really helped them a lot. We have seen that some of them have started, selling their products again and it has become a cycle where they sell the products and buy more and plant again, which is a really good initiative. Well, we have a lot of coalition projects happening on the ground right now with other DPOs in terms of COVID response and before COVID, we have had other works happening in the DRR area of work with other mental health stakeholders. We've been working hand in hand to provide the support that's needed for persons with psychosocial disability.”

## To be a young person with psychosocial disability in Fiji

**“F**rom my experience it wasn't easy from the beginning to be a young person with a psychosocial disability living in Fiji. I will say it was, it wasn't easy. First off to try and get yourself to be diagnosed as there was a lot of challenges. I had a lot of challenges trying to get the professional help from the hospital. But I'm thankful that at that same time, I was already in contact with PSA and they had provided me with a lot of information and peer support. I had my friend Leila, who really shared the experience and she shared how she coped with it, which helped me a bit until I got the help that I needed from the hospital. But the stigma, like I mentioned, you get to lose friends, you get to lose family members. It has been really hard. It has been emotionally, well, traumatizing, if I may say, with the reaction from families and friends and sometimes when I'm out there doing awareness sessions and I love to share my stories on those platforms, I get both good feedback and negative feedback. But, like I said, in the beginning was really hard. I feel it's the same with other persons with psychosocial disabilities, especially the youth. They feel they've been left out. They've been discriminated. I have always said to our members that even I myself, even though I'm working and for my experience, I've seen that psychosocial disability here in Fiji is the most discriminated disability when we still face that within the disability sector.”

“.....Despite all the CRPD being signed and ratified and persons with disability being educated on the CRPD, we find a lot of the youth still find it hard to get proper employment. Personally, I've lost, this has even cost me, my relationships, have forced me to be a single mum and having my children to lose their dad because I did not know how to handle it when I used to have my episodes, and that was like one of the hardest things, come to think of it. I only realised this a few years ago that because of me not understanding my diagnosis, I don't know what's happening in my head and all, I would react and do things that was inappropriate, maybe, which caused loved ones to just have enough of me and walk away. But I think of all the other youth out there who do not have the support, like I was lucky to have PSA. But for those youth who are out there, a lot of them are homeless now and they've moved from house to house because people just use them.”

“.....We both know persons with psychosocial disability, they are just like any other normal person until unless they're having a down day or experiencing side effects of medication or having a relapse. Other than that, they are okay. So people tend to take advantage of them when they are okay. They use them to get things done for them. And once they start becoming unwell, that's when they turn their backs on them. Or they think that persons with psychosocial disability don't know what's happening around, that they can be used to as something to make fun of, for them to have a good laugh. Like I said, the stigma is still really

the main contributing factor to why persons with psychosocial disability is still not recognised. They are still not recognised. And we feel that too in terms of when it comes to support that's given out to persons with disability. There is still a lot of misunderstanding. People still do not know that it's a disability and they should be given the equal treatment, compared to the other disabilities. But that is still not happening at the moment, and PSA is working hard on that to improve that.”

## Support and services in Fiji

**“Regarding supports and services available for people with psychosocial disabilities in Fiji**, we have only the health facilities, like we have one psychiatric hospital. But we do have stress wards available in the larger hospitals around the country. And we have mental health nurses stationed in health centres around the country. And apart from that, we have counsellors, organisations who do counselling. We have social workers who support persons with psychosocial disability. We have DPOs like PSA. PSA is the only one here in Fiji and in the Pacific as well. We're currently in the pipeline trying to help set up same organisations as PSA in Tonga and some more, as well as Kiribati...and those are some of the supports and services that we have here. We have a carers network, we have families network and we've got friends who are a part of PSA to do their own support. Things are happening for persons with psychosocial disability. And we have the support and assistance always coming from the Pacific Disability Forum, the National Council for Persons with Disability, as well as the Fiji Disabled People's Federation, Fiji Alliance for Mental Health. So these are some of the big organisations that we've always had support from, that supports PSA to support its members. I believe the Carers Network has always been there before I got to know PSA, but I'm not sure how long it has been there. But it's still there. It's carers and parents supporting one another and looking out for each other. We've seen that happening during these last few months during this COVID thing.”

## Support from the government

**“Talking about any support system available from the government side**, we do not have any. We do not have something in black and white, that is solid, available or present, which I can say, is like, there all the time to support persons with psychosocial disability, in terms of employment, in terms of life skills or entrepreneurship and all these things, we do not have that. Yes, the government does have, programs on and off. But it's mainly on life skills, income generating skills, all these things. But our inclusion in employment is still a

weak area because here in Fiji, a lot of our members still come to us and seek help from us to assistance in terms of finding employment for them. They have lost their job....just because they- the owner of the company or the organization- just found out they that they have a mental illness; Or because when they were applying, they were honest to tell them straight up, 'I am a person with psychosocial disability'. So in terms of employment, it's still a weak thing....and that is something that PSA is currently working on with the help of TCI. We are trying to look into the policies so we can advocate to have something solid that governs or looks after the employment for persons with psychosocial disability."

## **On receiving small grants from TCI**

**“My experience of applying and receiving the DPO support grant.** We've done three applications already, all successful. This archiving project is the second. The one I'm doing currently is the small grants. In terms of the processes and procedures it was like for me, I would say, like, I did not complete my education and I'm still learning every day, but having to apply for this, it's not hard. It's not hard because TCIA is always providing ongoing support. If you don't understand anything, you can always reach out. And we had ongoing Zoom meetings, which made it even easier because the team at TCI, they make you feel like you can ask them anything. They can give you that sense of confidence that they don't make you feel small or feel like you don't know what you're doing. This gives you a boost and motivates you, that you can trust them, that you can ask them confidently for support, which made it easy for me to write the proposals. And when I would send the proposal, when they saw something that they needed amending or editing, they would send me an email again and explain to me, which was just the kind of support that we need, especially persons with psychosocial disability working in this field. You know you have the passion, but sometimes you do not have the knowledge, maybe or the tools and to have an organization like that who understands and does not invalidate you or make you feel like you don't know what you are doing or what you are doing is wrong. It is just a great boost, and it makes you feel like there's hope that you're not alone, that you have people out there who can help you become great advocates and great leaders, when it comes to a psychosocial disability movement.”

**“On the topic of how the TCI grant helped us...** the flexibility- because we never had a donor who gave us thematic areas to cover or support the work that we did to archive Luke's poems and the history of PSA. It also supported some volunteers who were working, even though they volunteered and showed that they are passionate but we could tell that they needed some sort of financial support, which was also made possible with that grant. And

like I mentioned again, in terms of psychosocial disability, our members, they were so motivated. And when they saw, because most of them came in, they did not know what Luke was doing or they knew that he was an advocacy officer. But to have first-hand, to read Luke's work and actually go through it, it was a boost to them. It was something that was motivation to them, that they can also do better, that they.... persons with psychosocial disability, given the right support and the appropriate support can be successful and live a happy, fulfilling life. Also, it changed the way others looked at our office and people with psychosocial disabilities.”

## Grants are helpful...

**“Grants like the TCI A grant are helpful for DPOs.** It builds the capacity of the team who are actually implementing activities. The situation analysis grant, I have never done such an analysis before. And they had to give me three deadlines. First Deadline, I did not apply. Second deadline, I still did not apply. They even gave me a third one. And it's when the third one came, I said, okay, I will do it because I felt these people have so much faith in me and they believe in me. And I did it within four hours. And I sent the proposal and I was amazed that it got through because it was the first time and having, like I said, having a team like this, in TCI was great support. The other organizations who are part of the TCI have always been part of certain Zoom meetings, where I hear how they share and it has built my own capacity.”

“...And not only that, when the funds come in, like everybody in the office is part of the program. We get to learn something new, which is an opportunity because, this grant that came from TCI helped us do certain activities that does not fall into the thematic areas that's funded by other donors. I'm not saying that others do not want to fund it, but TCI is flexible to our needs and with the flexibility comes the support. And when we're doing the work, the ongoing meetings to check on us, the ensuring that we are on the right track. It helps with the capacity building of the organization then. It's important to have this kind of support from big organizations like TCI and others, to render to small organizations like ours who are doing the work.”