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FISHERIES TRAINING IN THE PACIFIC ISLANDS - PROBLEMS AND PERSPECTIVES

(Paper prepared by the Secretariat)

INTRODUCTION

1. The aim of this paper is to encourage discussion on aspects of fisheries training in the Pacific region, particularly training in technical or vocational skills.
2. The information used in compiling these comments has been drawn from experience with previous and continuing SPC training activities, WP.6 entitled "An outline of South Pacific Commission Fisheries Training Activities" refers, and from the survey of regional training opportunities and country training needs being conducted by the Fisheries training officer.
3. This survey has been ongoing from September 1985 and has led to the development of student questionnaires and the production of the Directory of fisheries training opportunities. Two hundred student questionnaires have been circulated and ninety-eight so far returned. Correspondence and country visits have enabled the compilation of staff training histories for nine countries and others are being developed through correspondence and SPC records. These will be completed during further visits to broaden the survey base.
4. The survey has clearly shown that many courses of a varied nature are available to participants from Pacific Island countries and that a large amount of training has been undertaken by fisheries personnel over the last ten years, with many individual officers having attended five or more off-island courses of substantial length and in some cases of diverse content. All countries visited and corresponded with have emphasised the importance of training to their fisheries. In view of this, it is paradoxical that almost every report on technical aspects of specific fisheries development projects, or on fisheries development needs in general, identifies the lack of skilled manpower as a principal constraint to more effective fisheries development in Pacific Island countries.

5. It may be initially considered that the training courses are in themselves defective, and, although this may be correct to some extent, countries should also examine more carefully their own attitudes towards training. There is generally little depth of thought going into the reasons and philosophy of training and some misconceptions of what training can achieve. Training development is often of a random piecemeal nature, unplanned in the long term and rarely co-ordinated with development programmes and ultimate departmental goals.

USES AND ABUSES OF TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES

6. The most basic misconception held about training programmes is the overly optimistic expectation of what they can achieve. There appears to be a line of thought that training courses can influence or create social and personality changes.

7. In the short term, while the participant is away from his own home environment, this may happen, but certainly not in the long term. If you send a lazy, somewhat dense, unmotivated person to a two-week outboard motor course, you will not get back an outboard motor whizz-kid; you will get back a lazy, somewhat dense, unmotivated person who knows a bit about outboards. Likewise, if a person trained in Business Management, in the Western concept, is returned to a home environment of extended family loyalties it is only to be expected that he will find it difficult to put into practise what he has learnt, especially if he gets social pressures from the community which may not be ready for new ideas or may even actively oppose them.

8. In order to develop meaningful training courses, student selection and course development must go hand in hand. The very large number of courses being offered and a general lack of serious scrutiny of these courses has meant that many senior staff are unaware of what individual courses are designed to achieve and what level of expertise they are intended to produce. Students can return either under- or over-trained or trained in something of minimal relevance to 'in-country' circumstances. The course itself is blamed for what is really poor selection and lack of appreciation of course content.

9. The preceding points can be illustrated by the example of a man sent on a one-day course to learn to play snooker. By the end of the day he might be expected to understand the rules and be able to play a basic game. It would be unfair to expect him to return home and beat the local champion - if this was the aim, a different and longer training programme should have been devised. If, however, the trainee happens to be colour blind, he will not be able to benefit from the course and should not have been selected. If his favourite sport is football, then his new-found snooker-playing skills are likely to decline rapidly due to lack of interest and practise.

10. Given that some countries have a complex and bureaucratic system of student selection, it is not surprising that selections based on inadequate information or wrong reasons occur. Current practise is often that details of a course or training programme are circulated, and the training officer or fisheries officer asks himself "Who can we send to this one?". The person who ultimately attends may have been selected for one of the following reasons:-

- (a) he will fully benefit from the course, which is relevant to his work and is pitched at the right level to further develop his skills;
- (b) he will benefit from some specific aspects of the course - for instance, the candidate may be a fish market manager attending a one-year general fisheries course which contains a one-month unit on fish processing. In this case, the candidate is essentially spending a year obtaining training he could have got from a more specialised one or two month course;
- (c) the course is not specifically relevant to his work, but it is felt that a period in another country, or contact with people from other countries, would be mind-broadening and beneficial, i.e. a holiday;
- (d) all the other qualified candidates in the department have been on courses recently, and it is his turn;
- (e) the fisheries department wants to keep up its good training record, or make use of funds which would otherwise go to another department;
- (f) he has friends or relatives in the right places;
- (g) he is useless around the department and this is a good way to get rid of him for a while.

11. This is not the right way to match staff and training. Initial approaches should not be to fit staff into whatever training courses come along. Rather, a detailed appraisal of staff training requirements should be made, giving thought to the long-term development and manpower requirements of the government fisheries service and of the fishing industry as a whole. Training establishments and aid donors should then be canvassed as to their ability to provide exactly the training required (and not an approximation to it). It should be realised that most schools are willing to adjust their course syllabi or develop courses to meet student needs, and in many cases it is educational policy to do just that. However, there exists a lack of direct contact between government fisheries services and educational establishments, which prevents such a process. This feature is itself another result of the generally low importance government fisheries departments attach to planning and co-ordinating their training activities.

12. The necessity of this integrated and planned approach is illustrated by this concocted example:-

An aid agency supplies a Pacific Island country with a fishing boat and crew for a new development programme which lasts three years. From the local crew, two are designated as counterparts of the skipper and engineer. At the completion of the three years when the overseas skipper and engineer return home it is found that the counterparts cannot properly operate the boat.

Why is this? Three years should have been sufficient to train the counterparts if a properly integrated training programme had been introduced. What actually happened was that the aid personnel, all well qualified people, had been chosen for their ability to make the aid programme work, their priority was to do this and in fact their reputations depended on the programme's success. They were not good at, had no time for, or were not even remotely interested in the training aspect of the job. The counterparts, although their title sounds grand, were in effect treated as low grade help, receiving no formal 'on-the-job' training and the informal training was limited to what they could pick up by observation. This is all right for simple tasks but inadequate for anything of technical or organisational complexity.

During the three years both the counterparts were sent on overseas courses. The engineer went to a course on large diesel engines held in a language he had difficulty in understanding and the skipper to a course which contained some basic navigation and seamanship but much other content which was not relevant to the operation of this particular vessel. On return from these courses they were not encouraged to put what skills they had learnt into practice, and soon forgot much of the finer points.

It would be unfortunate if the counterparts were accused of being incompetent, or even a bit dim, when in fact they were the victims of a poorly organised training programme. Proper organisation should have ensured that a training package was negotiated in the initial project development plan, with the counterparts receiving formal training on board from trained instructors or by stopping the development programme at periods, to conduct formal training sessions. Every year the counterparts should have been sent to relevant short training courses chosen with care from those available or developed in co-operation with the aid donor especially to meet the identified needs of the counterparts.

Training does not just happen; it must be carefully planned to fit the student and circumstances. It should be constantly evaluated to ensure it continues to be effective.

13. The above example also shows another reason why trainees may not perform as well as expected on returning from a training course - namely that they are not allowed to put the skills they have mastered into practice. This was noted from the recent SPC surveys as a fairly frequent occurrence, especially among students of mechanical or engineering disciplines, some of whom have not been trusted to put a spanner to a motor, despite the fact that they may have stripped and reassembled whole motors at school. On their return from their course, they are being regarded as trainees, rather than trained. While some skills when learnt will remain, others will be lost if not practised, and the student's skill levels will decline, perhaps along with his motivation.

14. Answers contained in the student questionnaires have shown that at least some students have the perception that overseas or specifically out of the region courses must be better than in-country courses. This has not been the finding of the SPC study, which has found that many of the 'in-country' training courses while sometimes small in scope and resources are addressing the actual on ground training needs which exist rather than those perceived to exist by some remote academic. Also, many of the more effective lectures in training courses have been given by local personnel who can better understand the problems and the students. This should be encouraged as much as possible and some thought given to assisting local lecturers to improve their presentation through short instruction on this subject.

15. The preceding paragraph raises the point of where countries and country training establishments should stop when developing their training. There seems to be an ambition when in-country training is being developed for the courses, or training unit, to become a regional establishment. There is undoubtedly a place for regional training establishments and every country has something to offer its neighbours in the area of training, but a proliferation of regional training establishments will serve neither the region nor in the long term the establishments themselves.

16. What is certainly needed is better communication between fisheries divisions, training establishments and the establishments themselves. There is a strong case for the establishment of some regional meeting or council which can rationalise and co-ordinate the development of formal institutional training courses.

SPC FISHERIES TRAINING POLICY

17. The current philosophy underlying SPC fisheries training activities has developed in the past two or three years, since the review that led to the establishment of the Fisheries Training Project. This review threw much light on many of the real problems faced by SPC member countries in obtaining and using appropriate fisheries training opportunities. Some of the problems have been mentioned above. Current SPC policy in fisheries training is to overcome these constraints, where possible, by pursuing the following objectives.

(a) Heightening country awareness of the importance of planned staff training programmes, in line with the recognised importance of the shortage of trained personnel as a constraint to fisheries development in the region. This is a long-term objective which can only be achieved by encouraging the discussion of, and exchange of, ideas on training at technical and political levels. We will attempt to keep the subject in the limelight in consultations, correspondence, publications, and future meetings.

(b) Increasing the quantity and quality of information available to SPC member countries on fisheries training opportunities. A first step in this direction will be the publication of the directory of training opportunities. This will be supplemented or updated periodically. Alongside this, the Commission is developing its capacity to respond in detail to specific requests for information on training opportunities, by subject, country, or other criteria. Where possible, independent course evaluations will also be carried out. Provision of this type of information will enable countries to better plan their training programmes as per objective (a) above.

(c) Responding to apparent gaps in the training opportunities available by developing training activities to meet specific country needs. The main criteria are: that SPC training activities should not overlap or duplicate those carried out by other regional institutions; that they should not be institutionalised or long-term activities better suited to implementation by an established college, university or other training body; and, most importantly, that they should be developed and refined in close co-operation with the countries requesting the training, so as to be "tailor-made" to their needs. Many 'one-off' training activities of this type at national, sub-regional and regional levels, have been carried out and others are currently planned or under way. The Commission's capacity to carry out this type of training activity will continue to be developed as appropriate.

SUMMARY

18. The main purpose of this paper has been to highlight for discussion purposes some of the constraints to the effective use of training opportunities by Pacific Island countries. It is fully realised that it is a lot easier to list all the things which are wrong in the training area than actually put them into practise. However, it should be re-emphasised, good training regimes do not happen by accident, they have to be planned and worked at.
