

Progressing social equity for coastal fisheries communities through dialogue

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On October 2021, the Pacific Community (SPC) through its Fisheries Aquaculture and Marine Ecosystem (FAME) Division organised its fourth Regional Technical Meeting on Coastal Fisheries and Aquaculture (RTMCFA4), which included the first session on Community-Based Fisheries Dialogue (CBFD). The CBFD was led by and focused on civil society organisations (CSOs) and other non-state actors (NSAs) that are actively engaged in fisheries management in Pacific Island countries and territories (PICTs). While the RTMCFA4 included staff of national fisheries agencies to discuss key technical issues affecting coastal fisheries and aquaculture and identifying strategies to strengthen livelihood opportunities for sustainable fisheries development in the region, the CBFD session centred on deliberating and agreeing on mechanisms that will enhance the processes and engagement of CSOs and other NSAs in future CBFDs. It is envisioned that the CBFD will provide a platform for meaningful participation and help amplify the voices of communities engaged in fisheries management, including women and marginalised groups, in important fisheries discussions, with CSOs and NSAs representing their interests. The outcomes of the CBFD will be shared with fisheries leaders in the region at Heads of Fisheries (HoF) meetings and at the Regional Fisheries Ministers Meeting (RFMM).

Background

SPC was requested by the Special Regional Fisheries Ministers Meeting in 2019 to commission a review of the Coastal Fisheries Working Group (CFWG), and to identify opportunities and provide recommendations on ways to improve the engagement of CSOs and NSAs in regional fisheries deliberations. The CFWG was established by SPC following the Forum Leaders Dialogue in 2016, in a bid to strengthen collaboration between communities, and national and regional agencies and institutions (MRAG Asia Pacific 2020). Another function of the CFWG is to identify coastal fisheries initiatives and ensure that adequate levels of support, resources and services are available to assist national fisheries agencies and local communities to implement management of their coastal fisheries resources (MRAG Asia Pacific 2020).

Following an independent review of the CFWG, including its function and effectiveness, a mechanism referred to as the Community-Based Fisheries session was proposed, and subsequently reviewed, approved and endorsed by fisheries leaders at the Twelfth Heads of Fisheries (HoF) in May 2020 and at the First Regional Fisheries Ministers Meeting in August 2020 (Pacific Community 2021).

This endorsed Community-Based Fisheries session resulted in the first CBFD, which was held virtually on 13 October 2021 at the RTMCFA4, and facilitated by SPC's FAME Division. While RTMCFA4 was a way for national fisheries agencies to discuss key technical issues affecting coastal fisheries and aquaculture, and identify strategies to strengthen livelihood opportunities for sustainable fisheries development in the region, the CBFD was largely independent. This first session was convened and focused on CSO and NSA participation, with at least 38 representatives in attendance and facilitated by an independent convener. The CBFD focused on discussing

and agreeing on a terms of reference (TOR) for governing future CBFDs, with government representatives and other observers joining in to witness the process.

In essence, the intention of the CBFD is to offer an opportunity for CSOs and NSAs to provide information, advice and identify key needs, through the RTMCFA, to fisheries leaders during meetings of HoF on priority issues regarding the sustainable use of coastal fisheries resources. This dialogue provided CSOs and NSAs a platform to share experiences and lessons from community-based initiatives, and reinforced efforts towards maintaining productive and healthy ecosystems and their associated fisheries resources, which are vital to the wellbeing and functioning of coastal communities. The deliberations within this dialogue focused on issues of common regional significance in the context of community-driven coastal fisheries (Pacific Community 2021).

Community-based fisheries and the roles of CSOs and other NSAs

The Pacific Islands region has used traditional marine management systems centuries before the West did (Johannes 2002) mainly to preserve marine resources for an intended purpose, and as sacred sites of cultural significance (Veitayaki 1997). In current times, Pacific societies have adapted these traditional practices in managing their coastal fisheries resources to improve food security and economic livelihood, revive cultural or traditional practices, assert control over and access to traditional fishing areas, or for some other presumed benefits (Govan et al. 2009; Johannes 2002). Furthermore, collaboration between local communities and external stakeholders, including government and non-governmental organisations has increased the numbers of community-based fisheries management initiatives across the Pacific region (Govan et al. 2009).

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The sustainable management of coastal fisheries resources, and the importance of engaging local communities in this process, has been given formal recognition through key documents including: *A New Song for Coastal Fisheries – Pathways to Change: The Noumea Strategy* and the *Melanesian Spear Head Group Roadmap for Inshore Fisheries Management and Sustainable Development 2015–2024* (Karcher et al. 2020), and further enhanced by the recently endorsed *Pacific Framework for Action on Scaling up CBFM: 2021–2025* in August 2021. However, most national fisheries agencies in PICTs are usually focused on fisheries economic development as opposed to sustainable fisheries management, with the poorly managed sea cucumber fishery serving as a testament to this (Gillett 2014). Furthermore, low priority is given by most national fisheries agencies to effectively monitoring coastal fisheries activities and resources, including collecting adequate data (Gillett 2014), which is further compounded by limited institutional resources and capacity to provide consistent on-the-ground engagement in CBFM. This is an opportunity for CSOs and NSAs, which include environmental non-governmental organisations, to play a crucial role in this area.

The engagement of CSOs and NSAs in the region has changed the focus from fisheries development to fisheries management through improved community participation in fisheries management processes (Gillett 2014). This has resulted in a significant number of coastal communities receiving assistance from CSOs and NSAs, including co-management arrangements, thereby improving their interactions with their fisheries resources (Gillett 2014; Karcher et al. 2020). This positive impact has also extended to national fisheries agencies, which have been being directly or indirectly changed for the better through their acquaintance with the work of CSOs and NSAs (Gillett 2014).

Enhancing social equity of coastal fisheries dependent communities

Community involvement and fisheries rights are interrelated topics, with community-based management opportunities being usually confined to coastal fisheries with local recognised rights to access, use and control over these resources (Govan et al. 2009; Karcher et al. 2020). However, not all members of communities implementing CBFM or other fisheries development initiatives will have equal rights over these fisheries resources given the varying social and power structures that exist within each community, including traditional governance, cultural roles, gender, age, ethnicity and wealth, to name a few. Given these considerations, not everyone within a community is equally involved in decision-making processes nor may they equitably benefit from community-based fisheries initiatives, with some of these initiatives further disadvantaging those with little or no decision-making powers.

Observations from some PICTs have shown that women and marginalised groups can be excluded from important coastal fisheries discussions despite the very outcomes of these deliberations having a direct effect on their food security and livelihoods. For example, in a study by Rohe et al. (2018)

in Roviana Lagoon, Solomon Islands, it was observed that women had little influence on local decision-making and had no representation within the council of elders, the customary institution that had the final say on many decisions regarding village life, as well as marine resource use and management. Therefore, some women were inclined towards breaking local marine management rules because they were dissatisfied with how management was conducted and had also partially lost trust in male leadership (Rohe et al. 2018). In Fiji, the placement of marine protected areas (MPAs) or no-take areas close to shore in certain communities have displaced women who traditionally fished in these nearshore zones and now must travel farther to fish or glean, with most women expressing that they were not consulted prior to the establishment of these fishing restrictions (M. Fox, pers. obs.). Given these caveats, local governance institutions, CSOs and NSAs can play an important role in fisheries management by brokering negotiations between different local stakeholders (Sulu et al. 2015).

Additionally, CSOs and NSAs have been crucial to CBFM by advocating for and engaging in fisheries co-management, with some extending their scope of work to progress social equity by raising awareness and advocating for social justice and human rights within the communities and countries they work with. For instance, the Pacific People Advancing Change (PPAC) programme, administered under SPC's Human Rights and Social Development Division, supports local CSOs and NSAs to advance human rights advocacy through the provision of grants. In some cases, this has resulted in collaborations among CSOs and NSAs to advocate for human rights advancement while also supporting environmental management (including fisheries). For example, two PPAC grantees in the Marshall Islands, Jo Jikum and the Marshall Islands Conservation Society, have teamed up to advocate against single-use plastics and to promote reusable bags, with this initiative supporting the right to a clean and healthy environment (Child and Kalsuak 2020) and environmental stewardship.

Community-based fisheries and the need for dialogue

The local on-the-ground presence of most CSOs and NSAs, and their experience in working with local communities, provides them with a unique perspective on how these communities function socially and economically, understanding of the issues that they face, and being aware of their aspirations and expectations. These considerations are vital given that to have effective fisheries governance and management, stakeholders must also take into account existing livelihood strategies if they are to succeed (Sulu et al. 2015). Therefore, providing a mechanism where community voices are heard, and have their perspectives and concerns considered, and appropriate actions taken, can help advance equitable benefits for fisheries-dependent communities.

Dialogues should not only be confined at the community level but also occur at the national and regional levels where experiences are shared, and cross-learning occurs; to collectively identify sustainable, practical and equitable

approaches to support coastal fisheries communities. The CBFD is a step towards formalising these important fisheries discussions at the regional level by facilitating the direct and meaningful participation of CSOs and NSAs engaged in the fisheries sector, including CBFM, and who have a reputation of representing members of the population who often lack access to formal decision-making structures.

Furthermore, having the CBFD convened at the RTMCFA sends a message that these deliberations by CSOs and NSAs are accorded recognition by the RTMCFA, including regional and national fisheries agencies in attendance, with the outcomes from the dialogue being shared with fisheries leaders at HoF, through the RTMCFA, and subsequently to the RFMM (Pacific Community 2021).

Next steps and closing remarks

The Outcomes Report from this first dialogue session, which is focused on the TOR governing future CBFDs, is currently in the finalisation process. Key items in the draft Outcomes Report on the TOR include the following:

- 1 the RTMCFA should include members of CSOs and NSAs that are actively engaged in CBFM in PICTs, with consideration given to regional or international organisations that are working on CBFM within countries or territories, not just national groups;
- 2 the purpose of the CBFD should be expanded beyond CBFM to include ecosystem-based fisheries management;
- 3 the establishment of a Technical Advisory Group to work with FAME, the convenor and vice-convenor on the agenda, report, and other topics should be considered;
- 4 consideration should be given to the option of rotating the role of convenor and vice-convenor between the three subregions of Micronesia, Melanesia and Polynesia, and that within each region, alphabetical rotation be encouraged;
- 5 the national selection process (of representatives) would be led by CSOs and NSAs, being sensitive to domestic considerations such as geography and other factors;
- 6 effective community representation is needed through representatives who are engaged in community-based fisheries and can speak confidently on behalf of their constituents;
- 7 CBFD outcomes should be reported back, in simple language, to CSOs, NSAs and community groups between the RTMCFA, HoF and RFMM;
- 8 the convenor and vice-convenor will accompany the chair of the RTMCFA to report to HoF and will be present at the time the HoF outcomes document to the RFMM is adopted by HoF.

It is envisioned that the CBFD will provide a platform for meaningful participation and amplify the voices of coastal fisheries communities through their representatives from CSOs and NSAs. This dialogue will also help recognise and support sustainable, practical and equitable coastal fisheries initiatives for PICT communities at the local, national and regional levels. For Pacific communities, sustainable fisheries management goes beyond protecting biodiversity, it needs to be people-centred first by ensuring that local stakeholders comprising community leaders and members – including men, women and the marginalised – are considered in decision-making processes in order to garner their support and buy-in. The pivotal role that communities play in coastal fisheries management in the region cannot be overstated, and as aptly mentioned in *The Noumea Strategy*, “coastal fisheries management is not only about managing fish; it is about supporting people at the community level”.

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