

The “culture of silence” and fisheries management

Aliti Vunisea¹

In Pacific Island countries, fisheries managers continue to grapple with implementing fisheries management initiatives at the community level, while also trying to ensure that existing sources of food and income are not compromised or lost. When implementing any form of management, managers must, for example, address issues relating to the most appropriate locations to place “no-take zones” (as opposed to people’s preferences for where they want the no-take zones to be), decisions on temporary and permanent closures and how to implement these closures (given people’s culture and customs), decisions on fishing gear and techniques to use and those to be banned (given the impact of certain technology on resources), seasonal fishing practices, and community traditions and customs.

In the Pacific, most decisions are arrived at through communal consensus; however, community agreement does not necessarily mean that all members of the community have had their views heard. The “culture of silence” — where people usually do not speak unless spoken to or asked a question, where people respect the views of elders and do not contradict what has been agreed to — is rife in many Pacific Island cultures. This culture of silence means the views of certain community members are not heard, and this usually includes the views of women and young people. Even when women and young people participate in discussions, culture dictates what they say and limits their comments to what is appropriate and not offensive to leaders and elders. This culture of not speaking out, not asking questions, not questioning decisions made by community elders and leaders, sometimes culminates in conflicts between resource users and resource owners during later phases of a fisheries development project. In many cases, there is no conflict, but women and young people who fish daily for food and income may be affected and even badly inconvenienced. They may have to walk greater distances to fishing grounds, resort to other fisheries, or look for alternative food sources because of their once accessible source of income and food is no longer available to them. The culture of silence, which has unwritten rules of only speaking when spoken to or if asked, and not going against decisions made by elders and community leaders, is a Pacific Islander custom that continues to limit the full participation of women and young people in decision-making processes, including those relating to fisheries.

Women and young men, who are generally the ones who fish daily and sell seafood, are usually not included in decision-making processes. During community meetings in Samoa for example, untitled men must sit outside meeting houses, which means the views and perspectives of the majority of fishermen in a village are not heard. In other cases, a representative of young people and women may be sent on their behalf to community meetings, but this representative is then responsible for participating in discussions, answering questions, and negotiating for these groups. The result is that sometimes there is discontent with decisions that have been made. In most cases, the most vulnerable in these situations include those that are poor in terms of resource ownership and access, those least involved in any planning or decision-making processes, and those who stand to gain the least from any form of management or development in the community. Not including these community members could result in the exacerbation of poverty and the widening of gaps between the “haves” and “have nots” within the community.

The Pacific Plan² and the Millennium Development Goals for Pacific Island countries³ both highlight the need to eradicate poverty (or hardship), which is prevalent in many rural and urban areas in the Pacific. Poverty as defined in financial terms (typically using an income threshold) is found in many situations where households lack a steady income source, whether from salaries or remittances. But poverty defined as such usually does not take into account people’s ability to access resources, and their ability to sustain themselves without a cash income, a situation that is very common in Pacific Island countries. For most Pacific communities, “poverty of opportunity”, referring to the ability of people to maximize (or at least fully access) opportunities such as education, is the most common form of poverty. Whichever definition of poverty is used, the fact remains that management that results in long-term benefits and a sustainable resource base for people, can result in immediate restrictions in access to reef or mangrove areas for fishing. These considerations should be paramount when implementing or designing fisheries management measures at the community level. Concerns regarding the impacts of implementing management initiatives usually do not reach community leaders and external partners because of

1. Community Fisheries Scientist, Reef Fisheries Observatory, SPC, Noumea, New Caledonia. Email: alitiv@spc.int
 2. See <http://www.pacificplan.org/tiki-page.php?pageName=HomePage>
 3. See http://www.spc.int/mdgs/MDGReport/Reg_report.htm

the culture of silence, or acceptance of decisions without opposition.

In their efforts to implement fisheries management measures, managers must adhere to required project outputs and objectives, and timelines as dictated by donors. As a result, the development and implementation of management measures at the community level is sometimes done without a thorough understanding of: 1) the usefulness of the initiative, 2) how the initiative impacts all sectors of the community, 3) which community members will lose out on their usual fishing grounds, and 4) which resource can no longer be accessed.

As an example, during survey work carried out for SPC's PROCFish project⁴ in the Solomon Islands, the author observed incidences where management was sometimes in conflict with people's needs. In most community-based initiatives, areas identified and agreed to as no-take zones are usually the areas closest to a village's fishing grounds (i.e. the most accessible fishing areas); these are usually areas that women and children can easily access by foot, and areas where adults teach young children fishing techniques. Closing these areas effectively closes off opportunities for passing on fisheries knowledge and skills to younger people, deprives women of the more accessible fishing areas, and possibly deprives some families of their basic food and income source.

The most vulnerable people in communities are usually the most "silent" and disadvantaged when management initiatives are implemented. Women and young people are in many cases not part of the management planning processes, but are usually the most affected when fishing bans are implemented. In some areas of the Solomon Islands where nearby fishing areas have been established as no-take zones, many other areas could have been chosen, including mangrove areas that were not accessible because of crocodiles, or outer reefs that were not accessible because of the lack of powered boats and fuel. No-take zones are often established close to villages where monitoring for poachers or infringements is easier; however, at times, this undermines the real need to keep such areas free for daily food needs, especially for the poorer members of the community who do not own boats, or women who are single heads of households with children they must feed.

Decisions at the community level are usually accepted without question or accepted with questions mulled over during long kava drinking or betelnut chewing sessions. These concerns hardly reach those making the decisions and/or the external partners involved in a fisheries project. Community

pride sometimes supersedes people's own realities; so in trying not to upset the community, people may agree to go along with a project even though families and certain community members may lose out. Strong respect and reverence for culture also plays a crucial role in people not speaking against or questioning decisions, and again illustrates how the culture of silence is embedded in the decision-making process in many Pacific Island communities.

Most fisheries management projects are assessed and evaluated using parameters determined by external partners, which primarily measure biological success. Involving people at the community level is usually viewed as community participation and compliance with regulations that are already in place. Very few attempts are made to assess individual or household benefits or the possible social implications from projects. The needs and aspirations of the community are usually not recorded or taken into account in project analysis and reporting. In these cases, poor, disadvantaged "silent" community members must rely on their skills to exploit other niches in order to maintain their food and income needs.

Where fisheries resources provide the basis for both subsistence and economic livelihoods, how should efforts and skills be re-directed to other resources or alternative forms of income generation in order to ensure the long-term sustainability of available fisheries resources? In many cases, external partners drive the process, with management being the major focus of work. Continuation of fisheries development is, in most cases, left to develop or expand on an ad hoc basis with communities left to plan for harvests and selling of exploited species.

With the major emphasis on resource management, fisheries managers should ask themselves: Are we doing enough to ensure sustainable economic livelihoods? Are we ensuring sufficient resource distribution to maintain internal and external financial needs of households? As the Pacific moves further into the information age, the culture of silence can begin to be broken down through the use of visual aids and other communication media. Cultural barriers can also be broken down through rigorous education and awareness work in communities and rural areas. Advanced education tools and the different available forms of media should be used to promote awareness.

The culture of silence remains a limiting factor in any attempt to fully maximise alternative potentials at the village level because those that could provide alternatives or offer solutions are usually those that do not have a voice in the community.

4. The Pacific Regional Oceanic and Coastal Fisheries (PROCFish) project is funded by the European Development Fund (EDF) and implemented by the Reef Fisheries Observatory and the Oceanic Fisheries Programme of the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC). PROCFish is designed to promote improved management of Pacific Island reef and oceanic fishery resources through a focus on applied research and environmental and socioeconomic surveys and analyses.