Fourth Regional Technical Meeting on Coastal Fisheries and Aquaculture

The Fourth Regional Technical Meeting on Coastal Fisheries and Aquaculture (RTMCFA4) was held online using a virtual platform, from 12–15 October 2021. RTMCFA4 brings together coastal fisheries and aquaculture scientists and technical experts in the Pacific to discuss important technical and scientific gaps, needs, challenges and opportunities. Twenty-one Pacific Community (SPC) member countries and territories participated, with over 132 participants total, consisting of members, observers, civil society organisations (CSOs), non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and other non-state actors (NSAs).

Not only was this the first RTMCFA to be held virtually, but it was also the first meeting to include the Community-Based Fisheries Dialogue (CBFD), which was convened by, and focused on, CSOs and NSAs.[1] The purpose of the CBFD is to give CSOs and NSAs an opportunity to provide information and advice on key needs, through the RTMCFA, to the Heads of Fisheries, to assist with informing Pacific Leaders on priority issues associated with the sustainable use of coastal fisheries resources. The CBFD also provides an opportunity to share experiences and lessons from community-based initiatives to strengthen efforts to maintain productive and healthy ecosystems and their associated fisheries resources that are critical to the wellbeing of coastal communities.

The overarching theme of RTMCFA4 was to discuss and address some of the main technical issues affecting coastal fisheries and aquaculture in support of better science-based resource management and the equitable access to resources, by capturing lessons learned from the "response phase" of the COVID-19 pandemic and identifying approaches and priorities as the region transitions to the recovery phase in 2022 and beyond.

The RTMCFA4 Outcomes and Actions Report, along with all of the working and information papers and, are available on the SPC RTMCFA4 webpage.[2] The RTMCFA4 Outcomes and Actions Report includes the agreed priority issues and needs to be actioned by SPC members, provides guidance to SPC's Coastal Fisheries and Aquaculture Programme, and identifies key recommendations to be taken to the Fourteenth Heads of Fisheries (HoF14) meeting in 2022.

The meeting included technical sessions on:

- supporting the integration of e-data systems into coastal fisheries across Pacific Island countries and territories (PICTs);
- enhancing capacity for effective coastal fisheries management;
- risk planning for Pacific aquaculture;
- aquaculture needs, priorities and future directions in the Pacific Islands region; and
- scientific and technical support in a COVID-19 context.

An update on the *2021 Coastal Fisheries Report Card*[3] was also provided. The meeting has requested HoF14 to initiate a review of the regional and national indicators for the Coastal Fisheries Report Cards, in line with the *New Song for Coastal Fisheries*[4] and other regional frameworks.

A session was devoted to the integration of e-data systems into coastal fisheries across Pacific Island countries and territories. (Image: P. James, ©SPC)

[1] See article on p. 18 of this issue: purl link
[2] https://fame1.spc.int/en/meetings/253
[3] https://purl.org/spc/digilib/doc/rfxg6
[4] https://purl.org/spc/digilib/doc/b8hvs

The new CBFD session focused on establishing an appropriate administrative foundation for future CBFD meetings. Participants provided feedback, advice and recommendations for future CBFD session arrangements by reviewing the provisional terms of reference, the convening arrangements, and the processes for the selection of participants for future CBFD meetings.

The CBFD also included a session on Implementing the Pacific Framework for Action on Scaling-up CBFM. CBFD participants discussed how CSOs and NSAs could contribute to and/or further align with achieving the outcomes in the Framework for Action. They considered how implementation progress can be monitored and evaluated, and what role CSOs and NSAs can play in strengthening and improving national and regional reporting.

Summary of PICT coastal fisheries and aquaculture technical issues, needs and priorities

Prior to the meeting, participants from Pacific Islands countries and territories (PICTs) fisheries and aquaculture agencies were consulted on their national coastal fisheries and aquaculture issues, challenges and needs. This information was summarised for both coastal fisheries and aquaculture, priority technical needs, and technical issues or challenges, and presented in plenary "to set the scene" and use the information as background for RTMCFA4 discussions.

Supporting the integration of e-data systems into coastal fisheries across PICTs

The first technical session highlighted the range of e-data tools that have been developed for improving the process of data collection, analysis and reporting on coastal fisheries. SPC member countries support the use of e-data approaches, as developed by SPC, to improve the quality of coastal fisheries data collection and to continue investigating and delivering on innovative technology, such as satellites and drones, as appropriate.

The integration of socioeconomic survey capability into the available e-data tools is underway. SPC was requested to continue with the introduction of e-data systems to all interested PICTs, with a focus on sustained training and capacity development to underpin successful implementation. This should include progressively expanding training by the Pacific Community's Fisheries, Aquaculture and Marine Ecosystems (FAME) Division to include analysis of fisheries data and the use of spatial analysis software. Members agreed to work with SPC to explore effective ways to incorporate their historic data into the e-data system, subject to satisfying standard quality control issues, as outlined in SPC FAME's data policies.

Enhancing capacity for effective coastal fisheries management

Against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic travel restrictions, SPC has continued to provide advisory and technical support to members, albeit remotely, to enhance members' capacity for effective management and sustainable development of their coastal fisheries. This session considered activities undertaken over the last two years. Through breakout groups and plenary discussions, members provided feedback on how SPC's support activities in the areas of policy, legislation, and monitoring, control, surveillance and enforcement (MCS&E) can be better integrated to enhance capacity for effective coastal fisheries management. Eleven key areas were identified, including, *inter alia*:

- recognising the importance of effective coastal fisheries management, including collaboration with local communities, and the use of available IT platforms and e-learning tools to build PICTs' capacity in the three broad areas of policy, legislation and MCS&E;
- facilitating the integration of data collection, policy, management, legislation and MCS&E in training opportunities offered by SPC, with support for learning exchanges within and between PICTs;
- ensuring science-based evidence for management plans and regulations, and case studies on how to link data to specific policies, and on the effectiveness of new management measures for specific fisheries;
- developing guidelines for drafting laws and regulations for coastal fisheries and aquaculture, including legal terminologies and models for legislation;
- developing guidelines for preparing coastal fisheries and community-based management plans;
- organising workshops on monitoring the implementation of management plans;
- incorporating traditional rules into local ordinances or bylaws to increase the chances of compliance by all fishers, and developing awareness materials on prohibited species harvest for communities; and
- providing training support at the community level, and developing appropriate e-tools for communities.

Risk planning for Pacific aquaculture

An update was provided on work undertaken by FAME on risks to PICTs' aquaculture production, with an overview of the kinds of risks exist. The importance of risk planning management for aquaculture was highlighted. An interactive plenary session, using a virtual whiteboard, was used to: 1) discuss and share information on the types of aquaculture risks faced within PICTs and any gaps in capacity to manage risks; 2) set priorities for development of practical

management approaches to each risk type; and 3) identify what works. Risks and management strategies were identified for, as examples, seaweed, tilapia, marine fish and giant clams. Additional suggestions indicated that shrimp and coral species restoration might also make good risk management examples.

Members invited SPC to provide further guidance on the extent to which risk assessment is relevant and can be used for small-scale aquaculture at the community level for food security purposes (i.e. subsistence and artisanal). The importance of accounting for the diversity of national contexts and productions (including cultural aspects) also needs consideration, bearing in mind that most small-scale aquaculture activities in the region are not commercially oriented.

Aquaculture needs, priorities and future directions in the Pacific Islands region

The Thirteenth Heads of Fisheries meeting endorsed SPC to undertake a regional assessment of the needs, priorities and future directions of aquaculture in the Pacific Islands region. The output from the regional aquaculture assessment and its recommended future directions and priorities will form the basis for consultations with members towards the development of a regional aquaculture strategy. The meeting identified and highlighted a number of issues.

- The multiple and interdependent purposes that aquaculture can serve: food security, economic and restoration. The key importance and expected contribution of small-scale, non-commercial aquaculture to food security and livelihoods was also stressed.
- The need for SPC to continue providing tailored technical guidance (e.g. feasibility studies, cost-benefit analyses) and capacity-building (e.g. training) to meet specific PICTs' needs in setting up integrated aquaculture operations, seed production systems, as well as a relevant enabling environment (e.g. policies, plans, knowledge sharing and awareness mechanisms).
- The importance of establishing new networks, or reviving existing ones, and strengthening collaboration to allow for the exchange and transfer of aquaculture knowledge and information, within PICTs and regionally.
- The requirement for further guidance and effort on sustainable and environmentally friendly aquaculture, including culturing native species and species with low environmental impacts. Specific guidance is needed on aquatic biosecurity, as well as for robust food safety and quality standards, in respect of international norms, to increase access to local and international markets.
- The need for SPC to coordinate the development of guidelines and an aquaculture code of practice at a regional level, as well as guidelines for food safety and value-adding opportunities.
- The importance of elevating the profile of aquaculture to allow access to financial support (e.g. bank loans) for small-scale aquaculture initiatives, noting that climate-smart aquaculture relies on sustainable high-quality inputs and efficient infrastructure, including hatcheries, transport and water supply.

Scientific and technical support in a COVID-19 context

Following the COVID-19 pandemic and associated travel bans, SPC experimented with alternate ways of providing coastal fisheries and aquaculture technical support to fisheries agencies, such as video conferencing and the development of online courses and videos. SPC informed partici-

Aquaculture ponds, Fiji. (Image: A. D'Andrea, SPC)

pants that online tools, on-demand modules, and training videos are available to members, and to CSOs and NSAs. Reflecting on the last year's experiences, SPC proposed a way forward using video conferencing and online training options, and invited members to provide feedback and preferences on the proposed options.

Members requested SPC to continue providing remote training and assistance through diversified and accessible e-tools and platforms, and to periodically inform them of any new training materials, applications and e-tools that could be applied at the PICT level. SPC was encouraged to further experiment with and use diverse formats to maximise and improve the long-term impact of training on the priority coastal fisheries and aquaculture topics identified during the meeting (e.g. statistical analysis, GIS, management plan drafting, MCS).

Recommendations for the Fourteenth SPC Heads of Fisheries meeting

The meeting discussed and agreed to nine recommendations to be transmitted to the Fourteenth Heads of Fisheries for their consideration in early 2022. These are included in the RTMCFA4 Outcomes and Actions Report.[5]

[5] https://purl.org/spc/digilib/doc/ezfxn

Feedback

Participants were asked to complete an online survey to rate aspects of the meeting. Unfortunately, there were only 29 responses, 86 percent of which were from member countries, with the rest coming from donor partners and observers. Participants were asked to rate the organisation of the meeting, the content, the use of Zoom and breakout groups, as well as the opportunity to provide feedback, and overall engagement. In general, these aspects were rated highly, with an average of 4.1 out 5.0. The aspects of meeting content were particularly high, with 4.4 out of 5.0. Twenty-two respondents also provided suggestions for improving future meetings.

The next RTMCFA meeting will be held in late October 2022, whether it will be a virtual, hybrid or in-person meeting will be determined by mid-2022.

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Ways for SPC to continue providing scientific and technical support during a travel ban were discussed during the meeting. (Image: ©MIMRA, Marshall Islands)