

Women of Tabonibara lead fisheries management into the future

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Background

Country leaders, government staff and community members throughout the Pacific Region support the application of community-based fisheries management (CBFM) to achieve sustainable coastal fisheries (Pacific Community 2015, 2020). Communities are the backbone of this approach. However, to ensure that CBFM provides equitable benefits to all, practitioners should apply a people-centred approach aiming for inclusivity and equity. Using gender sensitive and socially inclusive community engagement during the implementation of CBFM is one such approach.

In Kiribati, CBFM project officers use various gender and socially inclusive processes during community engagement including teams with a mix of genders; working with community leaders prior to activities in communities; and hosting separate meetings followed by joint reflection (see Delisle et al. 2021 for further examples). However, following engagement in communities with the presence of CBFM officers, it became unclear whether active involvement from different community groups was ongoing when the officers were not present. In this article, the Kiribati CBFM team reports on a recent women-led initiative held in Tabonibara, North Tarawa, where CBFM engagement through the Ministry of Fisheries' CBFM project started six years ago.

For the very first time in North Tarawa and possibly in Kiribati, women in Tabonibara village came together to establish a female-led community institution supporting the

conservation and management of marine resources. Such an institution is considered unique and uncommon, as men traditionally lead community institutions involved in marine management. The important roles and responsibilities of women in local fisheries management are widely known, but often women themselves are unaware of their crucial contributions in enhancing and supporting ongoing fisheries management initiatives at the community level. The occasion initiated and hosted by the women of Tabonibara is a great example of how women foster and enhance the sustainability of their coastal marine resources.

The event

On 15 May 2021, the women of Tabonibara organised a celebration to showcase their willingness to be active supporters of the implementation of Tabonibara's revised CBFM plan. The celebration launched the new association of women in Tabonibara that would support the conservation and management of coastal resources. The women chose the date of the launch and event to coincide with the introduction of local spawning closures for silver biddy (*Gerres* sp.) and land crabs (*Cardisoma carnifex*), and minimum size limits for fishes (as per the new national coastal fisheries regulations (MFMRD 2019). To raise awareness about the new association and its links to fisheries management among village members and neighbouring villages, women decided to organise a celebration that was entertaining and fun, thus increasing the likelihood of reach.

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Figure 1. Sport games between men from the North and South groups of Tabonibara village. © Iutita Karekenatu





Figure 2. Tabonibara women during the marching competition at the opening ceremony. © Lutita Karekenatu

The celebration included different activities including games (sports and fisheries quiz), marching competitions and official proceedings. Each component of the celebration had its respective purpose, tidily linked to the theme of the event – the new women’s association role in supporting Tabonibara’s efforts in managing their coastal fisheries.

First, a series of competitive outdoor games was organised (Fig. 1). Such competitions are very popular and attract most people from and around the village; ensuring that awareness messages are delivered during such an event ensures a large proportion of the community can be reached.

Second, two women’s groups joined a marching competition (Fig. 2). During their marches, the two women groups showcased the theme of the event, which was the spawning closures for silver biddy (*Gerres* sp.) and land crabs (*Cardisoma carnifex*), and minimum size limits for fish, using singing, dancing and eye movements.

The marching competition led to the *mwaneaba* (traditional meeting house) where the elders and men, gathered as the women’s guests of honour, were watching. The ceremony was officially opened (Fig. 3) and included the official launch of the women’s association.

CBFM officers supported the last part of the event through a catch monitoring “return of results” information session, and a quiz testing the knowledge of villagers on fisheries management and their community activities. During the catch monitoring “return of results”, most villagers were happy that most of their fishing activity was in line with the rules (community and national). Villagers were very happy about the result highlighting that the size of silver

biddy they catch is much greater than the minimum size limit imposed under the new national coastal fisheries regulations (MFMRD 2019). It is a great achievement for the community of Tabonibara where silver biddy is a species of significance. The return of such results is a great motivator to the community to continue with their initiative and their efforts in preserving and sustainably managing their coastal fisheries.

To assist with increasing awareness of the new national regulations, the CBFM team donated a regulations poster³ to the village (Fig. 4). Elders instructed that the poster would be put up in one of the corners of the *mwaneaba* to act as an easy reminder to everyone.

After the “return of results” session, the team ran a fisheries quiz as part of the entertainment. Elders, men, women and youths participated and competed with each other.

³ The poster was funded by New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade’s Tobwan Waara project, and the Pacific-European Union Marine Partnership (PEUMP) programme.

People had to answer 15 questions on the CBFM project’s background, the catch monitoring assessment, and women’s roles in fisheries. The CBFM team gave fishing lines and hooks as awards (Fig. 5). People in the community gave very detailed and knowledgeable answers. This is a positive sign showing strong engagement in CBFM activities from the people of Tabonibara and an indication that information and messaging are diffusing well throughout the community.

Launch of the women’s association

Entertainment activities provided a sense of fun to the event and attracted many members of Tabonibara and surrounding communities, who might otherwise not attend official fisheries management meetings. By doing this, women ensured that the attendance during the formal gathering and speeches was large. Importantly, the celebration launched the new association of women in Tabonibara that would support the conservation and management of coastal resources.

Figure 3. The CBFM team and the MP’s wife marked the opening by cutting the celebration cake. From left to right, Leslie James (CBFM), Tarateiti Uriam (CBFM), Meaua Harry (MP’s wife), Beia Nikiari (CBFM), Iutita Karekenatu (CBFM). © MFMRD, Kiribati



Figure 5. Prizes being given away during the fisheries quiz. © MFMRD, Kiribati



Figure 4. Tabonibara village councillor receives the regulations poster. © MFMRD, Kiribati



As described by Tiataake, secretary of the women's association, "the actions of the women of Tabonibara are very important for protecting and maintaining the marine resources that will feed and benefit the children of the future". The association will play important roles, such as:

- supporting and enforcing the law in Tabonibara to ban the harvest of under-sized fishes, and silver biddy (*Gerres* sp.) and land crabs (*Cardisoma carnifex*) during their spawning seasons, so that these resources would continue to benefit their children and everyone in Tabonibara in the future;
- taking responsibility for safeguarding the marine resources in their village from over-exploitation;
- making sure that no one is allowed to defecate along the coastline, and especially adjacent to the mangroves;
- accompanying each other to report to the association people caught fishing during spawning closures, including when the offender is a man;
- bringing the enforcement home.

Women's involvement strengthens the awareness of the management plan and of fisheries regulations. For example, illegal fishing activities can easily be reported either from fishing markets or from households where a woman is present.

Tabouea, a village councillor, mentioned that women are the village's great supporters:

Women are the backbone of the village decision and capable in doing anything as men can do but in a more organised and effective way. We all have witnessed their hard work from our different homes and we have no doubt that involving them in fisheries management will make a success story for our generation and in the future.

The initiative of Tabonibara's women is the first of its kind in Kiribati in the sense that women have become more active in the implementation but also in the monitoring and enforcement of the community's fisheries management plan. The women's association will provide an important backbone support to the community's initiatives around the conservation and management of their marine resources. Through this association, women can indirectly influence decision-making. In recognition of women's efforts, Bakaua, an *unimwane* (elder man), mentioned that women are most important people, they are breadwinners in their families and beyond that, they promote food security while raising their family.

A word of deep gratitude to women, the celebration was very remarkable and this is evident from the great preparation seen – we're going to work with women organisations as part of our system in the enforcement of management plan.

The celebration was a successful one. Respected people in the village including Buakaua (Unimwane), Tabouea (village councillor) and Tiroko (village chairman) remarked upon the recognition of women's input, ideas, opinions and the need to work together as a team to accomplish the village's vision through its management plan.

Ways forward

The women's association of Tabonibara is a grassroots initiative led by the women of the community without any external input. Its focus on the conservation and management of marine resources is unique, as one of the roles of the association deals with monitoring and enforcement activities. Other villages have no such initiatives. During the initial stages of CBFM, through awareness raising, consultations and development of a management plan, women are involved. Beyond that, their roles become unclear.

As Tarateiti Uriam (CBFM project coordinator) suggests:

What is uncommon in this association is that in our experience with communities, women have passive roles in the implementation of the plan, unlike men who are mostly involved with the enforcement and monitoring of the plan. This is a very new initiative in the sense that it is coming from women, and they plan how they would drive their institution keeping in mind the existing cultural norms and barriers such as that of men dominating the decision-making.

In this case, women no longer see the success of the community management plan as resting solely with men. In Tabonibara, within their traditional roles, women now see that within their traditional roles, they can still push and strengthen the enforcement through their collective efforts of working with their husbands and children as well.

Women want to be involved; they want to work amongst themselves as a group to ensure that the rules decided by the community are followed. They want to go beyond just enforcing rules that apply to women and work with others on rules that apply to other groups within the community. For instance, women see that they can work within their families, and can reach out to their husbands, sons and daughters to discuss rules or any breach of rules.

As a way forward, Tabiria Kararaua, head teacher of Amonge Primary School, mentioned the importance of working with women, and also indicated the school's support in enhancing awareness of Tabonibara's fisheries management initiatives to its children. Such initiatives would help children understand the reasons behind the decisions of their elders, and help them understand the roles they might have to play in supporting sustainable fisheries management in the future:

We are grateful to witness the celebration and to join the village with its activity to sustain the marine resources through sharing with our students as they will be decision makers in the near future.

Flow-on effects for Kiribati CBFM practice

The new women's association is a very helpful institution not just for the community, but also for the Kiribati female CBFM officers. In Kiribati, the cultural limitations faced by female CBFM officers when constantly working with male leaders in communities are seldom spoken about. Working with the opposite sex is culturally sensitive especially for female officers, as it may sometimes lead to different interpretations by women in the villages. This is something that female staff have to be mindful of at all times in order to avoid potential conflicts that may arise from misinterpretations from women of the village. These limitations prevent these officers from using their full potential to really engage with community members in a more informal manner and build stronger relationships.

Female CBFM officers mentioned how this women's association supporting fisheries management would help them to work more deeply, touch the core issues surrounding fisheries management and feel more connected to the villages. The institution will help female officers reach more fishermen indirectly through their wives, and have greater in-depth discussions.

The institution is a new channel of communication for the team when it comes to the implementation, monitoring and enforcement of Tabonibara's management plan.

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