

## Stakeholders of the Kiribati Community Based Fisheries Management Project gather to discuss lessons learned and way forward

by *Tarateiti Uriam*<sup>1</sup>

### *United we stand, divided we suffer*

Materiki Toromon, Butaritari community representative

The Community-Based Fisheries Management (CBFM) project in Kiribati is implemented by five partners: the Kiribati Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources Development (MFMRD), the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research, the Pacific Community, the University of Wollongong, and WorldFish.

Initially implemented in May 2014 on two pilot islands of the Northern Gilbert islands — Butaritari and North Tarawa — the project has taken root in five communities on these two islands (Kuma, Tanimaiaki and Bikati in Butaritari, and Buariki and Tabonibara in North Tarawa).

At the onset, the CBFM project was introduced to Island Councils of Butaritari and North Tarawa to seek approval for implementing the project in the pilot communities. The selection of pilot communities was made by the mayor and councillors. The CBFM team subsequently visited these communities to give an overview of the project, get community perception on fisheries and other related issues, and most importantly, to maximise community buy-in to the project. Community-based management plans, which were developed in 2015, include communities' concerns regarding their fisheries. Not surprisingly, some of the recommended measures were common to all five community management plans, such as the banning of destructive fishing gear and fishing practices, including:

- using small mesh sized nets and excessively long gill nets;
- splashing water with metal bars to scare fish and drive them towards nets (*te ororo*);
- encircling corals with gill nets (*borakai*);
- destroying corals to reach fish or octopus;
- fishing on spawning aggregations; and

- catching juvenile fish before they have had a chance to reproduce.

Community members were aware that these fishing practices were harmful but banning them had to be decided on collectively. The CBFM project allowed communities to do so and gave them the tools to enforce these measures by themselves.

Establishing marine reserves was another action that was recommended in all management plans. Bikati was the first community to establish a community-driven marine protected area and was supported by the Island Council and elders' association in Butaritari.

The management plans also enabled communities to extend their vision to other issues that indirectly affect fisheries, such as poor village governance, waste and sanitation, agriculture, education and alternative sources of income.

The long-term success of the CBFM project depends on a coordinated and collaborative approach among communities, island councils, various government ministries, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). In April, a second stakeholder meeting was held with approximately 45 participants from different groups<sup>2</sup> who gathered to discuss lessons learned, best practices and ways forward to ensure better collaboration between communities and other stakeholders. The mayors of Makin and TUC were invited because of their proximity to both of the pilot islands, which means that they share the same areas of the lagoon for fishing.

The meeting was opened by the Director of Coastal Fisheries, Karibanang Tamuera. Mr Tamuera emphasised the valuable roles that communities have in managing and

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<sup>2</sup> MFMRD, the Ministry of Environment, Lands and Agriculture Development, the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA), the Ministry of Women, Youth and Social Affairs, the Office of the Attorney General, the Curriculum Development Unit of the Ministry of Education, mayors from Makin, Butaritari, and North Tarawa and the Tarawa Urban Council (TUC) as well as representatives from pilot communities.



Figure 1. Leaders discussing way forward.

From left to right: Tebura Tanaua (Mayor of Makin), Kareke Itinibeia (Mayor of Butaritari), Tetaake Tenaua (Chairman of the Makin Unimwane Association), Mwaiango Teimwarane (Senior Fisheries Assistant), and Ruoikabuti Tion (Mayor of the Tarawa Urban Council).

sustaining their marine resources. He also mentioned that many of the issues that emerged during CBFM consultations needed to be addressed immediately, and therefore MFMRD was seeking assistance and support from other government bodies and NGOs to ensure that these villages could fulfil what they had envisioned in their management plans. Mr Tamuera stressed the need for stronger collaboration among different government ministries, Island Councils, communities and NGOs for successful outcomes. Mr Tamuera ended his speech by remarking, “We are not owners of these resources, we are only caretakers for the next generation.”

The meeting lasted two days and was facilitated by Materiki Toromon (community representative), Ben Namakin and Tarateiti Uriam (CBFM officers). Although the meeting physically took place in a conference room (Fig. 1), it was conducted to recreate the “*maneaba* way”, as meetings are traditionally run in Kiribati, in the meeting house called the *maneaba* (Fig. 2). The rules of the *maneaba*, where everyone is equal and free to express his or her own opinion, were applied to the meeting. This is different from other meetings between government representatives and communities where community representatives often feel they are in a position of “inferiority” and “invited” to listen to the expertise of government staff. This helped break down the barrier between community and government representatives, thereby allowing community representatives to speak freely and confidently.

Community representatives were given the opportunity to read aloud their management plans, which impressed participants from the ministries. Declining fisheries was the common issue identified in all of the plans, and villagers were looking for ways to ban the use of destructive fishing practices. Community members feared that even if these bans were respected in their own respective villages, other people from outside could break these rules. These villagers saw the need for bylaws that would enforce their management plan. In response, MIA urged these communities, along with their Island Council, to initiate awareness raising measures in neighbouring villages in order to gain their neighbours’ support with the management plan.

Once support for a community management plan was established, the community and its Island Council could then work with MIA to create a bylaw that would recognise the plan of the said community at the island level. The representative from the Office of the Attorney General, Monoo Mweretaka, introduced another option to address this issue: the Attorney General’s office recognises the bylaws of NGOs registered with the Ministry of Women, Youth and Social Affairs, if these by-laws complement a government Act. Therefore, if a community registers as NGO under MWYSA, its bylaws will easily be endorsed by the Attorney General’s office, and these bylaws will only be enforced in that community.

Because community members see fisheries as a complex and dynamic system, they have identified in their management plans other issues that indirectly affect fisheries. Some of these areas include climate change, waste management, coastal development and erosion, income generation, education, population growth, and governance. Community members spoke about the effect of coastal development, especially the work done on the causeway that is believed to have altered currents and affected the spawning runs of some fish. They also believe that more alternative sources of income will reduce the pressure on fisheries and more support for children's education will allow these children to find jobs and to support themselves financially without always having to depend on fisheries resources.

This meeting provided communities the opportunity to discuss with government officials from different government ministries on how to go about addressing these issues. Community members felt empowered and motivated by the positive responses from government officials. In the same way, staff from the different ministries were overwhelmed by the efforts that these communities showcased, and they learned a lot from their presentations.

Another important achievement of the meeting was the decision, initiated by government officers, to establish a steering committee. This committee will be made up of staff from the different ministries and chaired by CBFM

project officers. Due to their geographic repartition, the involvement of communities is being worked out. It will strengthen the collaboration between the different ministries and communities, and will reduce overlap of activities. All participants were impressed with the meeting's operation, and the TUC mayor, in particular, said: "I have been to a lot of meetings and this is the first meeting where we discuss freely what we want for our people." The mayor from Makin envied Butaritari and North Tarawa pioneering the CBFM project, and urged the CBFM team to visit his island.

The outcomes of the meeting were outstanding and all participants were satisfied, especially the communities knowing that their concerns were taken into account and were heard by government representatives. The meeting also proved that communities are on the same page as government, as highlighted by Tuake Teema, Senior Fisheries Officer, who said, "These communities are now speaking our language, the work they do complements the Fisheries Regulations." Biita Rameka from MELAD in the Agriculture Division encouraged and motivated the communities to lead by example for the whole of Kiribati.

One of the main lessons learned from this process is that close collaboration among different government institutions, island councils, NGOs and communities may be the key to fostering changes in the management of marine resources.



Figure 2. The maneaba, a traditional meeting house.