

Information Paper 4

Original: English

SPC initiatives in small-boat sea safety – Past, current and future

SPC's Second Regional Technical Meeting on Coastal Fisheries has been organised
with funding assistance from:



1. SPC has been involved in small-boat safety matters for more than three decades and this RTMCF provides an opportunity to look back at the work completed so far, including current initiatives, and to plan the way forward for SPC and partners to help Pacific Island countries and territories continue to improve small-boat safety in the region.
2. The foundation of SPC's involvement in small-boat sea safety is an FAO study undertaken in 1991 and the subsequent report published in 1992: 'Survey of safety at sea issues in Pacific Island artisanal fisheries'. The study, which encompassed 16 countries and territories, underlined the key features of small-boat safety in the region most of which are still relevant today: offshore tuna trolling in small outboard-powered skiffs remains the most risky activity for small-scale fishers, many accidents still occur on small boats used for both fishing and inter-island transport, the cause of accidents repeatedly include mechanical breakdowns, lack of navigation skills, limited availability of spare parts and the cost of safety gear – although this factor is more arguable today than 25 years ago. Importantly, one key recommendation was that ongoing education and training is required to improve small-boat safety.

SPC's safety at sea campaign

3. The above recommendation was immediately taken on board by staff of the then SPC Fisheries Training Section (FTS) – themselves small-boat operators and fishers – with the launching, in 1992, of a regional safety at sea campaign. This awareness-raising initiative was financially supported by the governments of Australia and France. It soon became an ongoing feature of FAME's work and a core element of the Nearshore Fisheries Development Section (NFDS)'s mandate after its merging with the FTS.
4. Over the years, many education materials, in various forms, have been produced and made available to national fisheries departments, small-scale fishers and the civil society in SPC's member countries and territories. Some have been replicated in other regions including Africa, the Caribbean's, the Middle East and South East Asia. Posters, videos, audio-clips, TV spots, workshop and course curricula, training guides, materials for school kids, safe operational plans for boat operators, leaflets, stickers, plastic cards, information bulletins and more have been produced with a production peak in late 1990s to early 2000s. Some of these materials remain in high demand while efforts are made to translate them in local languages. Content is kept up to date, primarily to catch up with evolving technologies in safety equipment e.g. the content of the 'SPC check-list card'.
5. Whether the SPC campaign saved some small-boat operators in the Pacific remains totally unknown as there is no record of rescued craft as a direct consequence of this work and sea accident data is virtually non-existing in the region. Undoubtedly however, several thousands of persons have read, watched, listened, been trained on small boat sea safety matters with the sea safety materials produced by SPC in the last 25 years.
6. Another important milestone for SPC and the region was, in 2004, the convening of the FAO/SPC regional expert consultation on sea safety in small fishing vessels. The meeting output was a report that included guidelines for improving small boat safety through the development and implementation of coordinated national strategies based upon a consultative national stakeholder framework and a set of specific recommendations, many of which are still very much relevant in 2018. It is interesting to note that the 'sea safety' chapter of FAO's global instrument, the 2015 Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (the SSF Guidelines) very closely mirrors the Pacific guidelines for improving small-boat safety. Participants to the RTMCF2 are encouraged to read the 2004 consultation report and copies will be made available at the meeting secretariat.

The ‘one bag fits all’ concept – emergency grab bags save lives

7. In the early 2000s, while the production and distribution of educational materials continued, SPC also became more involved in the promotion and actual distribution of sea safety equipment – always opportunistically, when project funding allowed, and often at a very small scale, for demonstration purposes. Sea safety items were getting more and more compact and affordable and it soon became obvious that, while on duty, SPC Fisheries Development Officers should be equipped with state-of-the art, albeit affordable, life saving appliances, all contained in a portable, water-proof bag, called the ‘grab bag’. It took a few years to fine-tune the content of the grab-bag – while item prices kept falling – to the ‘model’ that SPC currently promotes.
8. In 2018, an ‘SPC grab bag’ would cost approximately USD 1,000, excluding freight, and it includes the following items: one floating bag large enough to store a set of life-saving appliances suitable for small boats as well as a few additional items such as tinned food, water bottles and some fishing tackle; three or more inflatable life jackets; a whistle and mirror; one sea rescue streamer; one rescue laser (in lieu of the more conventional parachute and smoke flares which have an expiry date and are difficult to air-ship); one personal locator beacon (PLB), a satellite-based position signalling device; one strobe-light; one hand-held, waterproof VHF radio; one small compass; several emergency blankets; one hand-held GPS; one medical kit, and some spare batteries. While not all those items are SOLAS-compliant, they are sourced from suppliers needing to comply with strict national laws governing the manufacturing of sea safety equipment. The bag content may not meet the requirements of existing national safety legislations in the region and it is not intended to replace them either. Its purpose is to fill a gap as even if small-boat safety regulations exist, enforcement remains weak and there remains a general lack of ‘safety culture’ in the Pacific.
9. In 2009, Nauru was the first country to receive some ‘grab bags’ and associated training by an SPC Fisheries Development Officer. Since that date, more than 300 bags have been opportunistically procured and distributed to several countries as part of fisheries development projects. Early in 2016, the first case of a drifting fishing vessel being rescued after the crew used items in their grab bag was recorded – the three fishers drifted for 10 hours after an engine failure, they set the sea anchor from the grab bag to slow their drift then used the rescue laser to draw the attention of a passing boat which rescued them.
10. In 2016 and 2017, a total of four successful rescue operations have been recorded, all of them involving small fishing boats in Tuvalu that had a ‘grab bag’ on board and the crew could successfully operate the safety equipment in the bag, including, in three instances, the personal locator beacon (PLB). At least ten Tuvalu fishers’ lives were saved as probably were several hundred thousands of dollars in airborne search operations. The Tuvalu Fisheries Department (TFD) should be praised for fully embracing the ‘grab bag’ concept. Their commitment to address the issue of small-boat safety is paying off and the Tuvalu ‘grab bag’ programme provides an interesting model to other PICTs – model which will be developed in a presentation by TFD at the RTMCF meeting.
11. Early in 2018, SPC conducted a cost–benefit analysis (CBA) of Tuvalu’s ‘grab bag’ programme – the analysis can be found in the SPC Fisheries Newsletter # 155. The CBA concluded that “The grab bag programme in Tuvalu, comprising both distribution of the bags and training on the proper use and maintenance of the grab bag equipment, is highly cost-beneficial to society. The CBA found that AUD 1 invested in the programme can be reasonably expected to yield over AUD 20 of benefits, reflecting current net benefits for society of over AUD 2.87 million, and an undiscounted annual average amount of over AUD 14.36 million, in addition to saved household costs and improved productivity”.

Current initiatives

12. After 25 years of involvement in this area, the FAME Division remains committed to the continuous improvement of small-boat safety through ongoing technical assistance to its members. Funding permitting, ‘grab bags’ are ordered and training on bag use is delivered to recipients. In fact, it has become an underlying principle that every fisheries development project the NFDTS is involved with should include a sea safety element with some form of training for the local fishers and Fisheries personnel. Other FAME sections also promote and train in sea safety as part of their mandate. Notably, the Coastal Fisheries Science and Management (CFSM) Section with two initiatives of great relevance.
13. The Certificate IV in ‘Coastal Fisheries and Aquaculture Compliance’ has been designed for fisheries officers and administrators. The course covers the Monitoring, Control and Surveillance (MCS) skills required by fisheries officers to successfully undertake their work. This includes several essential units of learning that focus on essential sea safety skills: how to conduct an inspection of safety equipment prior to a vessel leaving its berth, how to maintain electronic equipment used in small craft, along with outboard motor maintenance and basic trouble shooting. This online course will be accredited by the University of South Pacific (USP) in early 2019 and is delivered through the USP’s Pacific TAFE. SPC trainers and assessors will be responsible for the delivery and competency assessments. The first cohort of students commenced in August 2018 and will be assessed in November 2018.
14. The other initiative is through FAME’s new capacity in coastal fisheries legislation – Coastal Fisheries Legal Adviser, Ariella D’Andrea – and the assistance SPC can now provide in the key thematic area of national small-boat safety regulations – which was identified as a weakness at the 2004 expert consultation. While the situation has improved since the early 2000s and several PICTs now have regulatory frameworks in place for small boat safety, much could be done in other PICTs. In the Cook Islands, safety requirements are provided for motorised boats below 24 m; in Fiji, the requirements apply to all boats of 15 m or less, regardless of the means of propulsion; in Samoa, they apply to boats below 15 m; in New Caledonia, safety regulations for fishing vessels depend on the area of navigation and vessel size. This illustrates the diversity of contexts and laws regulating small boat safety in the region.
15. Appropriate sea safety regulations are crucial for small boats, regardless of whether these boats are used for fishing or other purposes. Often, however, small boats fall in a grey area between shipping and fisheries legislation. In some cases, vessels used for fishing may be excluded from shipping legislation altogether as the focus is on merchant shipping and transport. In other cases, the relevant act excludes boats under a certain size from its scope of application. This is largely due to the fact that international maritime conventions mainly focus on merchant ships and industrial fishing vessels, and small boat safety is often viewed as a domestic matter. The issue is critical in the Pacific, where proximity to the ocean results in the widespread use of small boats by residents for all sorts of activities (e.g. fishing, recreation, transport, tourism).
16. When developing or reviewing small-boat regulations, the safety gear to be carried on board will be an important element to consider. Other requirements should also be established for vessel construction, crew certification and boat operation. In this regard, SPC’s Maritime Division has developed model regulations on small vessels under the PIMLaws initiative in 2007. Close collaboration between the fisheries and maritime administrations in-country and participatory processes are key to ensuring that safety requirements for small boats are appropriate, enforceable and socially acceptable.

Additional capacity at SPC

17. Improvements in small-boat safety in the Pacific Islands bring enormous social and economic benefits, nationally and regionally. This is now well documented, based on the successful ‘grab bag’ programme in Tuvalu. SPC appears well positioned to export the Tuvalu model to other countries, should funding be identified for a long-term, well-resourced project. What is proposed is a 3–5 year small-boat safety officer position at SPC whose role will be to export the Tuvalu model through ‘grab bag’ orders, training of national counterparts in the use and maintenance of safety gear (‘training of trainers’ approach) and the development of or improvements to sea accident data collection systems. Donor countries with an active role in maritime safety in the Pacific region may be interested in supporting or in sharing the cost of such a project.

Conclusion:

18. The strengthening of small-boat safety is of critical importance to Pacific Island governments, donor countries involved in Pacific maritime safety and regional partners like FAO and SPC. The FAO/SPC regional guidelines developed in 2004 for improving small boat safety remain generally relevant, in particular the need to raise political will and the use of participatory processes and the establishment of a national small-boat safety working group made of key stakeholders. The advent of cheaper, better and more-compact life-saving appliances make it possible nowadays to not accept anymore the relaxed attitude towards safety of many small-scale fishers and small-boat operators that prevailed three decades ago but still exists in the Pacific Islands.
19. SPC uses RTMCF2 to make a call for donor support to provide FAME with additional and dedicated capacity in small-boat safety. The position would aim at exporting the Tuvalu grab bag programme to other PICTs. It would complement FAME’s existing technical and legal capacity, making it possible to assist individual PICTs in a very holistic manner.