

SOUTH PACIFIC COMMISSION
TWENTY-FOURTH REGIONAL TECHNICAL MEETING ON FISHERIES
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PACIFIC ISLAND FISHING DECKHAND CERTIFICATION: PRELIMINARY
CONSIDERATIONS
(Paper prepared by the Secretariat)

Background

- 1 As a result of the growth of activity by Distant Water Fishing Nations (DWFNs) in the Pacific Islands region, there are now numerous Pacific Island nationals working on board foreign fishing vessels (FFVs) operating in the waters of Pacific Island countries. While there is no accurate information on the total number of people involved, in some countries the figure is well into the hundreds. Further increase in the involvement of Pacific Islanders as FFV crew offers the potential for increasing individual and national revenues from DWFN activities, as well as for the longer term development of a skilled labour pool that will assist the development of domestic commercial fishing enterprises in the region.

- 2 Large fishing vessels are potentially dangerous working environments and codes of practice for crew training and manning requirements are enforced in many parts of the world. The job requirements of a fishing deckhand are often more demanding than those of a merchant seaman. Yet, while employment in merchant shipping follows established international standards, the Pacific region has little in the way of mandatory requirements or standardisation of employment conditions for fishing vessel crews. Apart from Japanese-organised training for pole-and-line fishermen in Kiribati, there is currently no formal training programme for Pacific Island nationals working in fishing crew positions. Most of these fishermen are untrained, or have been trained in an *ad hoc* fashion.

- 3 The offering of deckhand training through national institutions to an internationally recognised standard as a prerequisite to FFV or offshore vessel employment would undoubtedly raise the overall standards of seamanship and safety aboard such vessels. The specifics of fishing deckhand training are not complex, but a person holding a qualification relevant to their employment is more likely to be employed, to enjoy better rates of pay than his unqualified counterparts, to advance through the ranks, to be confident in his capacities, and to enjoy the respect of his fellow workers. This could only have a positive effect on the overall standing of work on DWFN vessels as an employment option for Pacific Island Nationals. The availability within the region of trained crews would be a considerable advantage to both DWFN and national vessel owners and skippers. It is notable that most existing national marine and fisheries training institutions already have the resource capacity to offer the suitable programmes.

4 As a result, the concept of introducing a Pacific Island Fishing Deckhand Certificate (PIFDC) programme, coupled with a regionally managed crew register and employment service, has arisen. This paper discusses the possible arrangements for implementing such a programme.

TRAINING-RELATED ISSUES

Country interest

At the present time, the greatest interest in the proposed certification programme comes from those nations with the most active offshore fisheries, involving either DWFN or national vessels. These include Fiji, FSM, Kiribati and, more recently, Vanuatu.

5 In Fiji, the national Fishermens Association approached the Fisheries Division and FAO/UNDP Regional Fisheries Support Project to assist in the training of crews for the local longline fleet. In part to comply with the requirements of Fiji's 1986 Marine Act, but also in an effort to promote greater professionalism within the local industry, the Fishermens Association suggested a short course in seamanship, safety, and fisheries technology appropriate to local requirements. Subsequent meetings with the Marine Board indicated a positive reaction to the introduction of a Deckhands Certificate and led to the establishment of a working group of fishermen and staff of the Fisheries Division and the Fiji Institute of Technology.

6 The Kiribati pole-and-line fishery employs Japanese vessels and specialised officers. The offering, by Japanese interests, of fishing deckhand training for employment on these vessels has already resulted in significant employment opportunities for I-Kiribati people. However, the training has a high content of language instruction and attention to safety and seamanship is minimal.

7 In FSM, interest in crew training has been generated by the local purchase of purse seine and longline vessels and the difficulties encountered in securing suitable local crews for these vessels. A similar programme to that being carried out in Kiribati has been proposed for FSM, but this has met strong resistance from the Micronesian Maritime and Fisheries Academy, whose staff are insistent that, if training is to be offered, it should be to an internationally acceptable standard.

8 Vanuatu has almost 400 persons working on foreign fishing vessels. There is considerable concern over employment conditions and the unusually high rates of mortality associated with such employment.

Curriculum

9 In order to gain international recognition, the syllabus for fishing deckhand training should be comparable to that of merchant seamen, with additions and deletions appropriate to the fishing industry. A consolidated course of between four and ten weeks, combined with seetime requirements, is a fairly standard formula for qualification. A general course outline can be divided into three categories:

Seamanship: the meaning of common nautical terms; the name and function of various parts of a ship; knowledge of a compass card and ability to report a bearing; the ability to steer a compass course as directed; a basic understanding of the use of charts; the making of knots, bends, and hitches and their common uses; whipping a rope, seizing a wire rope, use of stoppers on wire rope; splicing (including wire); knowledge of slinging a stage, driving a winch, use and operation of a windlass; rope types and construction; understanding life at sea (chain of command, watchkeeping, hygiene); and basic cargo handling techniques (drums, crates and cargo nets).

Safety and Survival: general safety practices; distress signals and communications; small boat safety (equipment, safe practices, survival); liferafts (equipment, launching and entry); firefighting (types of fires and extinguishers, safety practices, use of equipment); first aid; and safe use of machinery.

Fisheries Technology: overview of Pacific fisheries; preparation, maintenance, and operation of fishing gear and equipment; net making and net repair; and introduction to fish handling;

Implementation

10 The successful introduction of a PIFDC programme as an employment standard for training deckhands would be dependant on a regional approach to implementation. Acceptance of the concept would open the way for national training institutions and governments to collaborate on the adoption of curriculum and standards for examination.

11 Agreement among interested training institutions as to curriculum and examination standards would facilitate the possibility of endorsement by a recognised standards authority such as the International Maritime Organisation. Whilst not essential, such recognition should assist in gaining appropriate recognition for the certificate from national marine boards as well as DWFN marine authorities.

12 It may be appropriate to attempt implementation on a small scale by initiating a pilot scheme in two or three countries. Regional agencies could be co-opted to assist in the preparation and organisation of the programme and the results of trial courses reported widely. A review of successes and problem areas could then assist in developing a programme for wider implementation.

13 There is considerable potential for international technical and financial assistance in support of a PIFDC programme through donor-financed access to consultative training institutions such as the New Zealand School of Fishing, the Australian Maritime College, or the Humberstone International Fisheries Institute.

EMPLOYMENT-RELATED ISSUES

Minimum employment standards and conditions

14 Existing employment opportunities on DWFN vessels tend to be organised on an ad-hoc basis, with crew being casually engaged on an "as-required" basis from fishing ports such as Pago Pago and Levuka. With the exception of the purse seine fleet, on-board conditions (particularly on Taiwanese and Korean vessels) are generally very basic, food is poor, work hours are long, and wages are not standardised or representative of effort. Those Pacific Island Nationals currently serving on DWFN vessels are typically employed for the most menial duties with little attention paid to training and promotion. In Fiji, despite more than 15 years of local crews on Levuka based longline vessels, it is reported that no local crewman have ever risen above the rank of junior bosun. There is no formal mechanism to adequately monitor crew movements or to provide assistance when problems arise.

15 There is thus little incentive, outside of economic need, to work under such conditions. Quite understandably, trained Able Bodied seamen prefer the more regulated environment offered aboard merchant vessels. With the exception of the US purse-seine fleet and some types of Japanese vessel, employment aboard foreign fishing vessels is unattractive to most Pacific Islanders. Under such working conditions it is no surprise to see a high level of dissatisfaction on the part of both employers and crews, with numerous disagreements arising.

16 If crew employment conditions could be negotiated on behalf of crew who are trained and certified to international standards, there would be improved acceptance of Pacific Island Nationals as professional crew for FFVs, and a stronger case for the development and enforcement of minimum employment standards and conditions. Improved working conditions, a standard contract, prospects of advancement, and ultimately, work experience to facilitate ownership and crewing of national vessels, would in turn make employment on FFVs more attractive to potential crew. A possible way to achieve these aims, which could be carried out in parallel with the PIFDC programme, is to establish a regional Crew Registration and Employment Service.

Crew Registration and Employment Service

17 The organisation and management of a crew placement service for foreign merchant vessels has been commercially undertaken in association with marine training schools in Kiribati, Tuvalu, and Tonga for some years. A similar placement and management service could be instituted for fishing crews and there is a strong argument for this to be undertaken on a regional basis.

18 The employment of trained crew and negotiation of standards and conditions could be significantly enhanced with the implementation of a formal system of crew management. The formulation of a Crew Register and Employment Service would simplify the negotiation of employment opportunities and the establishment of minimum employment standards and conditions.

19 The Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA, 1990) made the following observations in regard to employment of Pacific Island Nationals on FFVs:

"To assist in the development of fishing industries (by way of technology transfer) and creation of employment opportunities for nationals from member countries, bilateral agreements could incorporate employment clauses. This has benefit for some of the more developed DWFN's. By employing lower cost crews from member countries, the labour cost of vessel operations should be reduced. DWFN's are starting to crew vessels with nationals from non member countries, and to ensure that membership get employment benefits from vessels operating in their EEZ's, they might refuse to license vessels that do not employ member country nationals".

20 To further promote this perspective, FFA presented a paper to the meeting of Parties to the Nauru Agreement (PNA 10/3, 1991) which noted:

"The development of a standard contract for Pacific Islanders employed on DWFN vessels would have advantages both for the employee and the employer. Provided that the terms and conditions stipulated in the contract are consistent with international standards and practice, there should be no major objections from DWFN's".

21 Although FFA has taken steps to regularise the agreements under which Pacific Islanders serve on DWFN vessels, only a little progress has been made and low wages and poor working conditions remain the norm. This situation could be improved by the establishment of the proposed regional Crew Register, coupled with the gradual incorporation of set numbers of Pacific Island crew and minimum employment standards and conditions into access agreements. It is worth noting in this regard that the new US Tuna Treaty, which will remain in force for 10 years, provides opportunities for nationals of all signatory countries to crew on purse-seine vessels, whether or not that individual comes from a country that has bilateral arrangements with the US.

37 The proposed Crew Register would list all PIFDC holders interested in DWFN vessel employment. A centrally located Register Office would be empowered to liaise with fishing companies and negotiate employment contracts. The Register operators would need to be able to enforce the minimum terms and conditions of employment, probably through direct links to licensing mechanisms.

38 The establishment of a Crew Register is seen as a way to enhance the ability of a deckhand certification programme to promote employment of Pacific Island nationals. It is a complex and politicised issue, the details of which are beyond the intended scope of this outline presentation. Whilst it may be perceived as a logical progression from the implementation of a PIFDC programme, it is suggested that the two issues should be considered individually with initial priority being given to the question of deckhand certification.

Conclusion

39 To date, there has been little coordinated effort directed towards increasing financial benefits to Pacific Island countries through the enhancement of employment opportunities for Pacific Island Nationals on DWFN fishing vessels.

40 The introduction of a Pacific Island Fishing Deckhand Certification programme could be of considerable benefit in enhancing such employment opportunities and improving working conditions for Pacific Island Nationals employed on DWFN vessels.

22 In order to realise the full potential for Pacific Island employment opportunities on DWFN vessels, the certification programme should be developed in conjunction with a regionally-managed Crew Register and Employment Service.

23 The workshop is invited to discuss the issues presented and to consider endorsing a PIFDC pilot programme.
