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NOTES ON THE INFORMAL LUNCHTIME MEETING
ON AQUACULTURE DURING THE PORT VILA FFC

By the Secretariat of Pacific Community

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Notes on the informal lunchtime meeting on Aquaculture during the Port Vila FFC

(by the SPC Marine Resources Division Secretariat)

During the course of the 35th Forum Fisheries Committee Meeting hosted by the Government of Vanuatu in Port Vila, the opportunity was taken to host a short lunchtime session on 12th May 1998 to discuss the SPC-proposed "Regional Aquaculture Strategy" (see Attachment) with interested member countries.

The SPC Director of Marine Resources, Dr Tim Adams, introduced the paper, stressing that the concept was only at a preliminary stage, but that a meeting of regional organisations involved in the marine sector had already briefly discussed the concept (at the first meeting of the SPOCC Marine Sector Working Group) and had asked SPC to take it further. He pointed out that the FAO South Pacific Aquaculture Development Project (SPADP) was due to terminate in mid-1999 and, because it was the only wide-ranging source of development assistance and advice on regional aquaculture, the need to find funds to continue a regional level of assistance was becoming urgent. This regional strategy was designed to provide a framework within which potential donors could identify subsectors and organisations through which to best target their assistance to the most pressing aquaculture problems of the region, whilst avoiding duplication. He added that SPC was not anxious to "extend its empire" and to take over the leadership of the regional aquaculture sector, but that member countries and other organisations seemed to be looking to SPC to try and find ways to fill the emerging regional need for the application of advice and assistance in practical aquaculture solutions at the local and commercial levels, and the extension of methodologies being worked out at ICLARM, at USP, and in national research programmes.

He also hoped that those present might have some ideas about where to seek this additional support, as there did not appear to be much hope of the FAO-Japan trust fund that currently supports SPADP being continued into a third 5-year cycle of aquaculture assistance, and it was likely that a range of donors would have to be coordinated. He mentioned that SPC hoped to obtain a basic level of aquaculture staff support from the regional indicative programme under the 2nd funding protocol of Lomé IV, to keep the ball rolling, but that this was by no means guaranteed. However, the regional strategic approach held much promise for the future, and he invited comments from member countries on the 2-page paper that had been tabled.

The representative of Tonga welcomed the opportunity to discuss regional aquaculture initiatives. The forthcoming end of the FAO project was regretted by the region since it was the only opportunity for government departments interested in aquaculture to directly address these issues. The FAO project was always approachable and gave a quick response. He noted that many countries faced the problem of coastal resource depletion. Fishing technology was improving to the extent that some species were in danger of extinction. The beche-de-mer fishery was a classic example of overexploitation, where Tonga had had to close down all exports. However there was the possibility of accelerated recovery through aquaculture not only for these species but for giant clams, greensnail and trochus. The action needed was not simple though. Whilst several countries had succeeded in spawning these species, it was another matter to bring their culture to the final commercial stage.

He said that Tonga was very much involved in the science of mariculture but they had yet to accomplish the subsequent stages of commercial development. He mentioned that marketing information and coordinated national strategies were important factors. Whilst tuna fisheries were currently a very topical development prospect, Tonga was looking towards aquaculture for the long term future.

Turning to the SPC paper, the representative of Tonga agreed with the general strategy, and that in a case where there were many organisations it was a good idea to identify the most appropriate development avenues. He suggested that the strategy should concentrate on a few high-demand areas and develop mechanisms so that future initiatives would be fully accountable to national needs. Within national fishery departments it was difficult to get an overview of the broader picture, and there was occasionally a tendency to concentrate on narrow research activities without taking into account the needs of farmers. National capabilities in broadening the commercial development scope of aquaculture needed to be strengthened.

The representative of the Federated States of Micronesia supported the sentiments expressed by Tonga, and for the same reasons. It was cautioned that there was a need to streamline functions and save costs.

The representative of Samoa said that aquaculture was a major development area in his country, although the projects were not on the same scale as those in Fiji and Tonga. However it was a very important area for the future, and it was essential to have a regional service to draw upon when problems occurred. He recalled a meeting that FAO had convened in 1996 in Nadi, which included discussion about how to continue the type of activities in future that FAO had provided, and the results of which were further discussed at the 1996 SPC Regional Technical Meeting on Fisheries. There was no firm recommendation out of that meeting except that ICLARM and SPC should work together to investigate the options. He noted that the ICLARM/FAO/SPC proposal for a continuation of a regional level of support to aquaculture had been circulated to all, and was pleased to see that this additional strategy paper now brought in all the relevant regional organisations.

The representative of the Cook Islands supported the other speakers in respect of the recognition given to the role of aquaculture in long-term future strategies. He encouraged SPC to get together with others and decide how to facilitate overall development.

The representative of Australia noted that there was a considerable amount of methodological and biological research in existence, or going on, and that perhaps the main additional need was in marketing and practical farming assistance.

The representative of the Forum Secretariat said that his organisation would be delighted to contribute to assisting with the marketing and governance needs identified by the draft strategy. He also confirmed that many donors were now requiring overall strategic plans covering all agencies working in each sector, and that the Forum Secretariat was encouraging this kind of planning for all major donor projects.

The representative of Palau said that the region was at a stage where an overall enhancement of mariculture development was needed. There was not much benefit to the region in each institution working in isolation.

The representative of Tonga felt that the advantage of having a harmonised strategy was that it would keep the mechanics of regional consultation simple. It was always difficult deciding what channels to go through in approaching each organisation to get action, and the opportunity for a common point of contact, where appropriate, would be very useful.

The representative of Palau thought the strategy was a positive step. He noted that the FAO SPADP project had meagre funding, and could not often respond to requests for assistance.

The representative of Niue said that his experience was that many development initiatives were driven by donors and didn't always address training needs adequately. He felt that training was very important if initiatives were to be sustained over the long term, particularly in such a crucial area for the future.

The representative of Australia asked how it was intended to address the issue of learning from past experiences. The leader of ICLARM's Program on Coastal Aquaculture and Stock Enhancement replied to this with a summary of past experience, and in particular the lessons that the region had learned, and could learn in future, from the experience of other regions. He mentioned however that the circumstances in the region were unique, and that systems that were successful in other countries could not be transferred without adaptation, and that the region might even be successful in areas where others had failed. He felt that the region should analyse which species it possesses with aquaculture potential, and concentrate on those where the region had a comparative advantage. For example, the culture of groupers and Napoleon wrasse had yet to be developed, but there were good prospects for the region developing the growout of these species into an economically significant, yet ecologically sustainable, activity. This was one new area where the technology remained to be perfected, and viability proven, but where the Pacific had enough of an advantage to make it worthwhile to try.

The representative of Australia commented that the rural level was important, and that farming systems development needed to look very closely at financial viability at the village level. It would be useful in the strategy if the path for translating research into enterprise were spelled out.

The representative of Papua New Guinea outlined the dilemma of government and other agencies when most of the examples of commercially successful aquaculture he could recall had taken off after private sector investment, rather than government encouragement. Governments could try to lead the private-sector horse to water, but they couldn't force it to drink. And if an opportunity for profit was perceived, the private sector would tend to immediately latch onto it independently of any government assistance programme. He felt that a need in this area was assisting countries in the management of private sector initiative. The role of the private sector needs to be noted and government didn't want to be seen to be competing with it.

He pointed out that some of the aid given to countries was given because it was of benefit to the donor, or because it addressed the donor's preoccupation. One area where aid could be of immediate assistance was in helping to get Pacific Island products into markets, and this should be integral to the regional strategy.

The SPC Director of Marine Resources welcomed these comments as they tallied with his own experience whilst working for government, but pointed out that it was difficult for regional organisations to work directly with the private sector, and recounted recent experiences of trying to get agreement on an explicit mechanism at the South Pacific Conference.

The representative of Papua New Guinea said that getting private sector involvement in regional activities might just mean getting private sector representatives sitting around the table talking, and that perhaps Governments could nominate people as appropriate.

The representative of Tonga mentioned his experiences of developing a government/private sector interface by working through fisheries associations, and said that this could be a useful means of networking. He was uplifted by the genuine interest by agencies in improving this contact, and felt it was a viable channel for addressing national training needs. He suspected that most regional training opportunities were currently enjoyed by government officials.

The representative of Cook Islands endorsed the comments by both Tonga and Papua New Guinea and pointed out that SPC already managed to address the private sector fairly well through its masterfisherman and postharvest programmes.

The representative of Palau reinforced the need to avoid committing too many resources to the government sector at the expense of the private, and felt that training should be a major thrust of the strategy, particularly targeting rural areas.

The representative of the University of the South Pacific mentioned USP's training programmes and stated that the USP Marine Studies Programme was committed to giving an aquacultural focus to its new Institute of Marine Resources facilities in the Solomon Islands. The new Director of IMR was being selected for aquacultural experience. She also mentioned that USP was increasing its involvement in postharvest training, and that this was relevant to the regional strategy.

The representative of Palau summed up the general feelings of the meeting and supported the development of the strategy.

The representative of Samoa added that whatever form the strategy eventually took, that it had to be responsive and accessible to all of those around the table.

The representative of Australia mentioned that the Bureau of Resource Sciences was currently reviewing Australian aquaculture, in order to provide directions over the next decade, and that this information might be of assistance in drawing up the final document.

The meeting closed with the sincere thanks of the SPC Director of Marine Resources for the contribution of all the participants to such a useful discussion over such a short space of time. He hoped to circulate these notes on the discussion as soon as they were compiled, but warned that this might not be immediate because of heavy travelling commitments. He looked forward to seeing all present at the next SPC fisheries technical meeting (sponsorship permitting), when there would be opportunity to discuss the issue in more depth.

Attachment

Informal Discussion Paper

5th May 1998

For the attention of participants in the 35th Forum Fisheries Committee meeting, and discussion by any interested parties at a short informal session on 11th or 12th May (FFC activities permitting) convened by the SPC Director of Marine Resources.

The Role of Regional Institutions in a Pacific Islands Aquaculture Strategy

Focus: This set of principles is intended to guide the future work of the institutions identified in this document: intergovernmental and other international institutions working on aquacultural issues and problems within the Pacific Community area, including methodological and biological research on aquacultured organisms, assisting government or private sector development in aquaculture, specialist training in aquaculture, marketing, economics and environmental protection.

This definition of issues, and regional organisation responsibilities, is intended to be the first step in a process of "taking stock" of the current situation of aquaculture in Pacific Community countries and territories, and finalising an agreed strategy for future development. This is not the last word, and is not set in stone, but is a working document to improve the application of future regional assistance to aquaculture problems, of all kinds, in the region. There will be opportunities for inclusion, revision, and fine-tuning, with time.

Why draw up a regional strategy?: Aquaculture, like other components of the "aquatic resources" sector, is promoted in its various aspects by various institutions. It is too big and complex an issue to be completely handled by any one agency. But, unlike other components of the sector, no firm management principles are yet evident to guide the application of new initiatives towards the most appropriate action. Western tropical Pacific tuna fisheries, for example, are becoming subject to increasingly detailed organisation and management, exercised by countries acting cooperatively under international agreements. Coral reefs and lagoons have long been fished by Pacific Islanders where sophisticated systems of tenure and use-rights have evolved. Aquaculture, by contrast, is a relatively new concept in most Pacific Islands. It is a field which will inevitably become increasingly important with time, and which is already becoming important at the local or national level in several Pacific Island countries, but where few guidelines are in existence at the regional level. As a result, institutions often work in isolation, sometimes at cross-purposes, occasionally duplicating work already completed, and sometimes not noticing issues that should be addressed as a high priority.

This brief initial document is to seek agreement on basic issues and principles, and includes provision for fine-tuning, elaborating or modifying regional measures as the sector develops and diversifies.

10 major aquacultural needs and issues facing the region:

1. Need for a regional advisory service and focal point putting Pacific Community individuals, institutions, and government departments in touch with information and opinions on all aspects of aquaculture;
2. Applied research:- development and testing of workable aquaculture systems appropriate for Pacific Community peoples, including yield improvement and genetic assessment;
3. Aquacultural education, including research training and pure research;
4. Vocational training in practical aquaculture, and extension of research results;
5. Export market information and opportunity alerts, and coordination of subregional approaches to extra-regional markets;
6. Assistance with national legislative/economic infrastructure for, and governance of, aquaculture;
7. Assessment of potential environmental effects of intensive aquaculture
8. Assistance in development of aquatic quarantine systems and procedures and impact assessment of exotic species introductions;
9. Compilation of statistics and detailed information on aquaculture activities
10. Occasional review of the status of regional aquaculture, production of regional overviews, and convening agreement on amending this strategy as appropriate.

Some issues and needs are not included here because they are less appropriate, or a lower priority for addressing, at the regional agency level. For example, the operation of credit schemes is more appropriately tackled at the national or local level, the provision of start-up equipment is most appropriately taken up by donor institutions, and the promotion of joint-ventures and businesses is usually more appropriately the domain of national economic planners working together with the private sector.

Suggested "lead agencies" to address needs and issues

1. Focal point:Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC)
2. Applied research:ICLARM Coastal Aquaculture Centre
3. Education & pure research:.....University of the South Pacific (USP)
4. Vocational Training:SPC
5. Marketing:Forum
6. Governance:Forum
7. Environmental impacts:SPREP
8. Quarantine:South Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP)
9. Statistics:SPC
10. Review and refocusing:Pacific Community members (includes all Forum and USP members)

Note 1: In some cases, the capacity does not yet exist to address the issues identified within the institution identified. This is a signal that a regional gap exists that needs to be filled, and that the identified institution is agreed to be the most appropriate, at this stage, to seek the resources to try and fill it.

Note 2: This list is not exclusive. Other regional institutions, or international institutions with a regional focus, may become more appropriately considered as "lead agencies" in sectoral areas over the course of agreeing this strategy, and any agency may be able to play a supplementary role in any of these areas (each issue has been deliberately restricted to one "lead" agency, but that does not restrict other agencies from providing additional support).

Note 3: The word "Forum" is left deliberately ambiguous at this stage. During its current Corporate Plan period the Forum Fisheries Agency is concentrating its entire attention on oceanic capture fisheries management and development, but retains the mandate, under its constituting Convention to work in all aspects of fisheries. In the meantime it is possible that the Forum Secretariat, within its existing economic, trade and policy development competencies, can play a role in these areas.

Note 4: The FAO Regional Aquaculture Development Project is not here identified as a "lead agency" in any of these subsectors because the project comes to an end soon, but it is acknowledged that many of these areas have been led by SPADP in the past..

Note 5: The Marine Resources Division of the Secretariat to the Pacific Community, despite being the author of this paper, and despite featuring in this document as the overall regional "focal point" for regional aquaculture issues, does not lightly take up this mantle. The role of focussing future regional aquaculture strategy was offered up for discussion at a recent meeting of regional organisations (the first SPOCC Marine Sector Working Group on 17th March 1998) at which SPC was left with the responsibility for initiating this strategy.

Conclusion: This brief, basic outline was quickly drawn up by the Director of Marine Resources of the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) and is presented for discussion and potential provisional endorsement by:

- Identified institutions, by correspondence;
- Forum member countries, at an informal meeting during the course of the 35th Forum Fisheries Committee Meeting;
- Pacific Community members not present at FFC 35, by correspondence.

It is intended to provide a forum for discussing this "institutional strategy" in much more depth at a regional fisheries meeting to be held at SPC headquarters in Noumea from August 3rd-7th. However, it is necessary to come to a basic working agreement as a matter of priority in order to provide guidance on aquacultural issues to various regional initiatives currently under discussion.