

Strengthening small-scale fisheries in Fiji, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu – A project wrap-up

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Introduction

Pacific Island countries and territories (PICTs) rely on fish and fisheries for nutrition, employment and economic growth. Around half of the total fisheries' contribution to gross domestic product is sourced from coastal fisheries (Pacific Community 2016). Good management and governance of coastal fisheries is critical as the population increases and the production of fish from coastal fisheries decreases, exacerbated by climate change and the impacts of natural disasters. Coastal communities and their fisheries are exposed to climate-related extreme events including cyclones, sea-level rise, ocean acidification, floods and coastal erosion. Adaptive capacity can be improved by acquiring assets, such as insurance, technologies and knowledge.

Over the years, alongside an increased emphasis on community-based resource management, PICTs have increasingly turned to aquaculture as an additional source and sustainable supply of aquatic foods (Singh 2016). Aquaculture is identified among fisheries activities as a proven method for climate change adaptation, ensuring food security and enhancing community livelihoods.

Men and women participate in both subsistence and commercial fisheries, including aquaculture, with women particularly being active in post-harvest activities such as processing and marketing. Although men's contributions are relatively well understood, fully understanding the degree of women's participation in fisheries has been hampered by a lack of adequate research and data collection for policy development (Vunisea 2004; Avril 2018).

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) project "Strengthening small-scale fisheries in the Pacific" (Canadapt 003), funded by Global Affairs Canada, was implemented in Fiji, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu from 2021 to 2024. The goal of the project was to increase the resilience of fishermen and women from coastal communities vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. The project was organised

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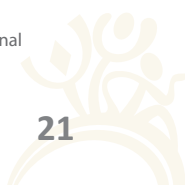
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Food safety and post-harvest processing training for fishers and vendors in Auki, Solomon Islands. © Zafiar Naaz, FAO

around gender-specific outcomes (improved equal participation of women with men in decision making and improved gender responsive planning and budgeting in national fisheries agencies) that were linked to outcomes related to strengthened management capacity in small-scale fisheries; being better prepared for natural disasters and climate change impacts, and resilient fisheries value chains (Naaz et al. 2023).

The project ended in December 2024, and this paper summarises some of the key areas where the project was able to contribute to effective partnerships and by aligning to priorities of the respective fisheries agencies in each PICT.

Disaster risk reduction and disaster risk management

Approaches to disaster management in Fiji, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu have tended to focus more on post-disaster response rather than preparedness. The National Disaster Management Office (NDMO) in each country usually takes a lead in disaster management activities, although it is not focused on various sectors due to time and financial constraints. Sector-specific disaster risk management standard operation procedures (DRM SOP) can help fisheries agencies prepare and respond to disasters at the national,

provincial and regional level. The Canadap003 project supported fisheries agencies in working closely with NDMO and other stakeholders to progress fisheries sector-specific DRM SOPs, including outlining the institutional setting and coordination structure within fisheries for effective preparedness and response. As part of the development, fisheries officers were trained and provided with templates to collect gender-disaggregated and gender-sensitive data for guiding disaster response. To a different extent in each country, training included questionnaire planning, design and testing using KoboToolBox.

In Fiji, the fisheries DRM SOP was developed through stakeholder consultation attended by senior and divisional fisheries managers, and followed by training on how to use the SOP from September 2022 to February 2023.

The Vanuatu Fisheries Department had previously developed a draft DRM SOP with the support of the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research Pathways project team. It was finalised through a series of stakeholder consultations attended by provincial fisheries officers and representatives from development partners. The DRM SOP was then internally reviewed followed by its official launching by the Vanuatu Fisheries Department in June 2024.

The Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resource (MFMR) in Solomon Islands completed two facilitated stakeholder consultations attended by provincial fisheries officers, and resulting in a draft DRM SOP, which is now is ready for completion.

Fisheries managers and divisional heads in each country provided advice based on lessons learned during previous disasters, an adaptive approach that is anticipated to be required for regularly reviewing DRM SOPs in all countries. For all countries, disaster preparedness messages have been developed into community posters to support DRM SOPs. These are being disseminated in English and local languages, and are also available in formats suitable for sharing on social media.

Aquaculture development planning in Fiji

Activities that addressed building fisheries value chains for fishermen and women in coastal communities, resilient to climate related changes, extreme events and other economic, social and environmental shocks, differed across the project countries depending on government priorities. Three examples are: 1) support to women's groups that are farming mangrove oysters in Fiji; 2) supporting the Fiji Ministry of Fisheries and Forestry (MOFF) in producing a national Aquaculture Development Plan; and 3) providing Solomon Islands' fisheries officers with kits to support post-harvest fish handling and food processing training in communities.

In partnership with the research division at MOFF and the Muanaira Women's group in Rewa, the project team developed an internal *Manual for edible mangrove oyster farming in communities*, which provides a detailed overview of the farming procedure primarily for reference by MOFF officers but also serving as a baseline for future development, such as new technological innovations. For example, the project procured and supplied commercially available disaster resistant mangrove oyster farming baskets from Australia. In partnership with MOFF and the Pacific Community, farmers and fisheries officers were trained on the assembly and installation of these innovative oyster baskets. If they prove to be a sustainable cost-effective option, they are expected to increase farming efficiency, reduce environmental impact, and improve the quality of oyster products.

With the increasing interest of new communities in Fiji wanting to engage in mangrove oyster farming, a gender risk assessment tool (Delisle et al. 2021; Waqa et al. 2023) was designed and applied in communities undertaking community-based mangrove oyster projects in Fiji. The findings then guided the production by MOFF of an Oyster Farming Site Selection Checklist, which addresses both environmental and social site selection criteria and can be adapted for other community-based commodities.

Under this project, a national consultant facilitated the development of a five-year Aquaculture Development Plan for Fiji to guide the ministry, its development partners and the private sector towards the nation's aspirations for economic and production targets. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations consultant has also supported

the aquaculture division of MOFF to begin implementing the development plan. This includes scoping current aquaculture farms in Fiji's Central, Western and Northern divisions, starting to create model farms for priority commodities, and building the capacity of fisheries officers to provide extension service to aquaculture farmers on best practices.

Networking and capacity development

Because of the project's strong focus on gender equity, various training and workshops were implemented to improve women's participation in fisheries activities.

In partnership with the Women in Fisheries Network-Fiji, the Pacific Community, the University of Wollongong (Australia), and national fisheries agencies, the project supported a national forum in Fiji (Morris and Tuivucilevu 2024) and another in Vanuatu (Malverus et al. 2024) for women fishers, vendors and entrepreneurs. The Fiji event concluded with a call to action by the Women in Fisheries Network-Fiji (Anon 2024) and both fora stimulated ideas for future events to help connect women with local partners for exchange and learning.

In Vanuatu, VFD used project resources to hold a national fisheries symposium (national Fis Toktok) within Santo, Malekula and Maewo islands from August to September 2023. The symposium provided opportunities for men and women fishers and stakeholders to share challenges and opportunities for fisheries development.



Various post-harvest food processing training workshops were held in Solomon Islands. Project activities fostered equal participation of women and men through adopting inclusive community engagement processes (Delisle et al. 2021) such as having separate focus group discussions for men and women in community consultations, and scheduling field visits during a time of the day when women were available. In addition, where women were engaged in a fisheries value chain in large numbers they were also specifically targeted for some activities. For example, women who were particularly active in producing and selling smoked fish in the Shortland Islands not only participated in training on improved food safety and processing, but were also supported in participating in an Island Food Systems in Transition Forum hosted by Kastom Gaden Association, WorldFish, Solomon Islands National University, FAO and MFMR in Honiara.

FAO partners with national governments to deliver on their priorities. In support of this ambition, non-contractual partnerships with organisations and other projects working on similar issues in the project countries were a feature of successful outcomes in the project. Fostering such relationships helps to avoid duplication and, where longer-term support programmes are active, could improve sustainability of outcomes.

Overall, the project contributed to building capacity in disaster risk reduction and disaster risk management, fostered partnerships for gender in small scale fisheries, improved networking for women in small-scale fisheries value chains, and delivered on some policy and guidance documents of priority to the national agencies.

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