



A new angle on coastal fisheries development in the Pacific

Key messages:

- A healthy ocean is of critical importance for the well-being of people in the Pacific.
- Government action is required to ensure that marine resources continue to sustain food security and rural livelihoods.
- Significant portions of national fisheries agencies' budgets are spent on development policies that seek to modernise coastal fisheries – with limited success.
- Community-based approaches that build on local needs, rights and strengths have the potential to make coastal fisheries policies more inclusive, sustainable and cost-effective.
- This policy brief identifies guiding principles on how national fisheries agencies can refocus their efforts to better support rural communities.



Coastal fisheries development

Marine resources are the backbone of community economies in many parts of the Pacific, and form a crucial component of people's subsistence. Fish is the primary animal source of protein for people in coastal areas, and is essential for nutritional well-being, particularly for children. But it is feared that coastal fisheries will not be able to meet future demands. Overfishing is depleting export commodities such as beche-de-mer, and large seafood species such as bump-head parrotfish and marine turtles. Unsustainable land-based activities, such as logging and mining, are destroying mangroves and degrading coral reefs. Human population growth and rapid social change are perpetuating a vicious circle of environmental degradation and rural poverty. Climate change is expected to exacerbate these threats to rural livelihoods and food security.

National governments, therefore, aim to increase the income of fishers, improve access to markets, create employment opportunities, and protect coastal ecosystems. However, the pathways to achieve these goals remain unclear, particularly given the region's geographical and financial constraints.

Over the past 40 years, national governments and their development partners have aimed to modernise coastal fisheries. Too often, this has implied replicating the fisheries policies of developed countries. Examples of such "blueprint" solutions are: providing grants for boats and fishing gear to fishers; building large-scale infrastructure such as fisheries centres; and promoting aquaculture such as seaweed farming and giant clam production. But despite significant financial investments, many of these fisheries development projects seem to have been more costly than beneficial, and have not structurally improved the livelihoods of fishers. In many cases, the proposed solutions were culturally inappropriate and out of scale with the rural economy, and activities ceased when subsidies ended. In other cases, mismanagement and unrealistic expectations led to growing inequality and conflicts within communities.

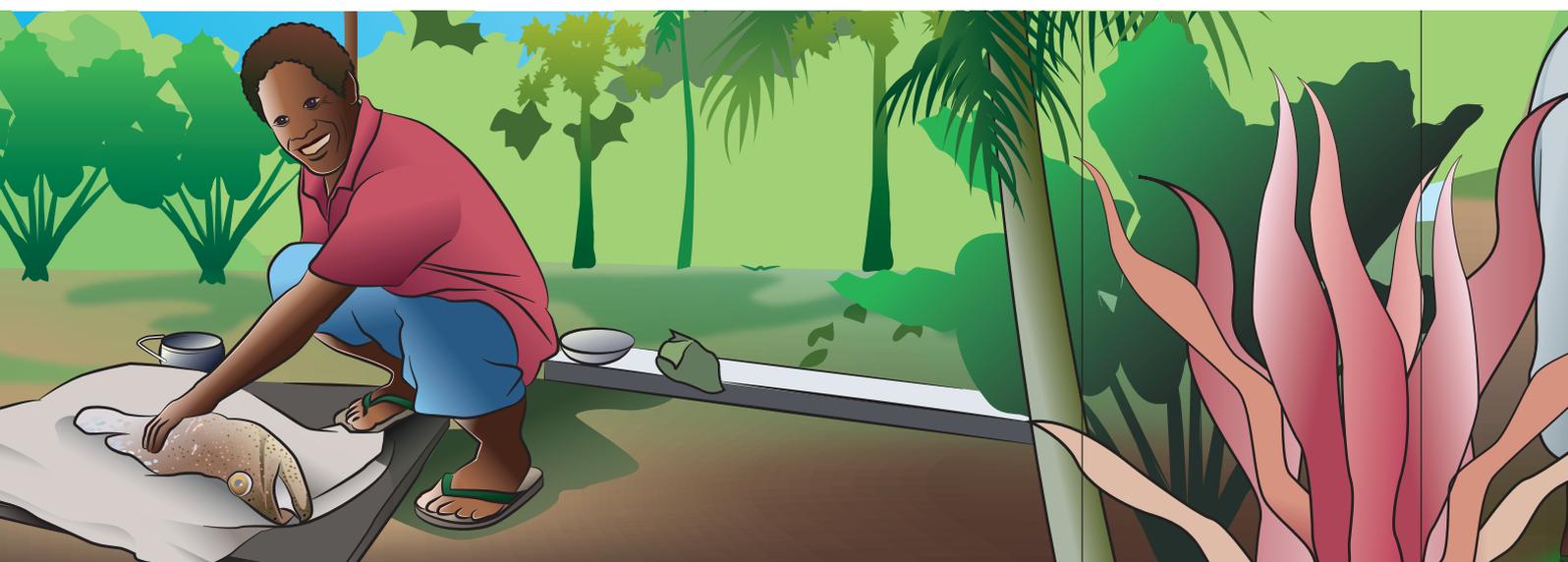
In 2015, the Pacific Islands Forum Leaders affirmed that fisheries agencies in the region were severely under-resourced and focused on outdated fisheries development activities. The "Regional Roadmap for Sustainable Pacific Fisheries" and "A New Song for Coastal Fisheries" have both called for a renewed focus on coastal fisheries management, and have urged national governments and their development partners to support community-driven development activities.

Helping people help themselves

Civil society organisations throughout the world have experimented with community-driven development as an alternative model to top-down "blueprint" approaches. These initiatives are based on a participatory process in which people identify their strengths, problems and needs, mobilise resources, and take collective action (see box 1). There is broad consensus that by building on people's own knowledge, resources and values, rural development interventions can be made more inclusive, sustainable and cost-effective. Clearly, these insights are not new: grassroots development approaches have been promoted in many parts of the Pacific Islands since the 1980s. However, the uptake of these participatory principles in coastal fisheries development policies and projects has been very limited. The livelihood support projects of national fisheries agencies, such as sea cucumber mariculture, fisheries centres, and fleet mechanisation programmes, continue to be manifestations of the top-down, donor-driven modernisation paradigm.

Refocusing fisheries agencies

In recent years, valuable lessons have been learned on how to effectively enhance the livelihoods of fishing communities. It is evident that grassroots initiatives can achieve lasting improvements in the well-being of poor people. But most of these people-centred projects remain small and localised. To achieve impact at scale, the support of governments remains indispensable. Here we identify – based on the WorldFish participatory action research programme in the region and an extensive literature review – 10 guiding principles on how government agencies can effectively support community-based fisheries development.



Guiding principles



Strengthen community-based fisheries management

The foundation of improving rural livelihoods is ensuring that the marine resources on which people depend remain in good health. People may need support to revive stewardship, assert territorial rights, respond to emerging threats, or rehabilitate their fisheries (see box 2).



Build on what people have

Support communities to articulate their needs and aspirations, and identify activities that people can do themselves to improve their lives and that fit local conditions and cultural values (see box 3). A participatory approach aims at strengthening people's own initiatives and ideas, rather than introducing a predetermined livelihood activity or simply donating materials.



Target interventions

Interventions to develop coastal fisheries should be directed at people most in need. This means working with groups of people who fish, or process and trade fish. Externally driven projects often fail to reach people that depend directly on fisheries.



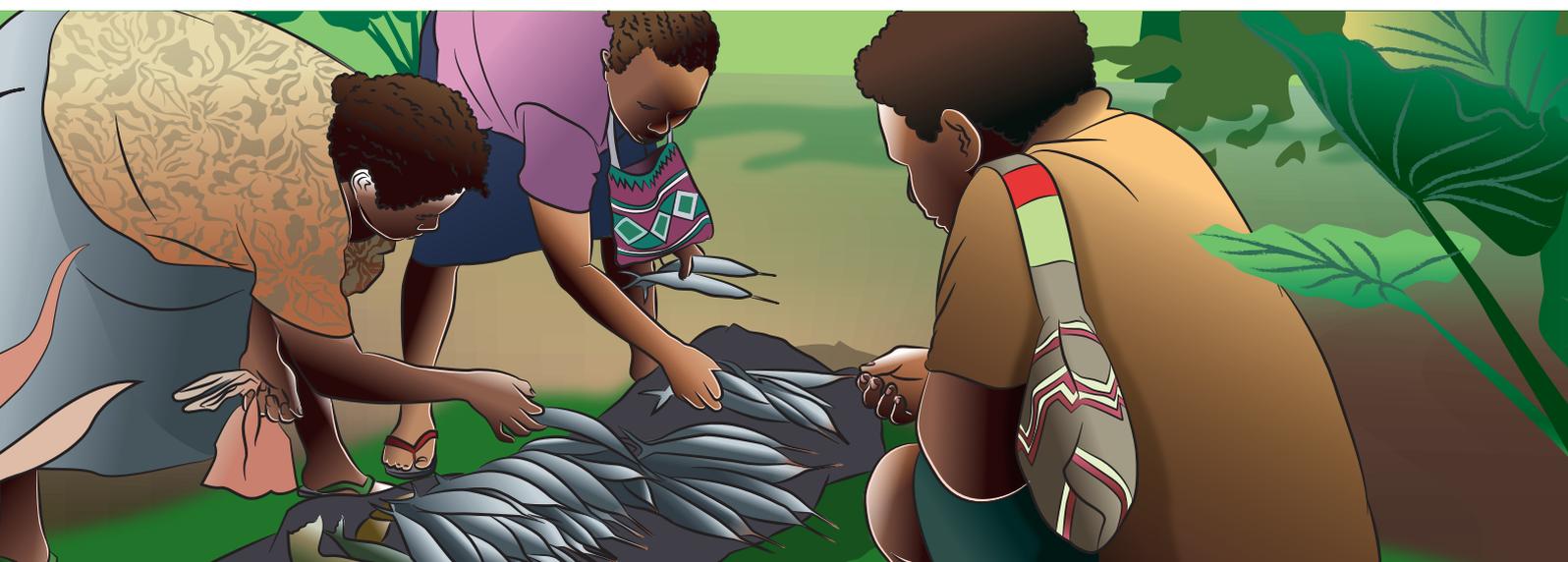
Promote appropriate technology

Grassroots innovations that require little money and can be easily maintained and repaired by people in the village will be more sustainable and profitable than overly ambitious ones. Activities that reduce expenditures and labour, increase the availability of healthy food or improve safety can have a huge impact on people's lives. In fact, small-scale improvements of subsistence activities, such as selling fish at the local market, can benefit more people than ambitious income-generating projects that target export markets.



Consider gender

Women play an important role in coastal fisheries, particularly in gleaning and in the processing and marketing of fish. But most externally driven development projects tend to focus exclusively on men. By challenging gender inequalities, more inclusive and equitable development outcomes can be achieved.





Strengthen existing groups

Initiatives in which people have control over decision-making and planning are more likely to succeed than donor-driven projects. Community co-financing, in the form of matching funds, pooling resources or providing labour, ensures that better choices are made. It is, therefore, essential to work with established and reputable community-based organisations, such as tribes, churches, women savings clubs, youth groups or fishing associations, which have the experience, capacity and leadership structures to foster collective action.



Share information

There is a wealth of information available on developing coastal fisheries, which can help identify the best interventions (see box 4). Informing and engaging other stakeholders, such as village leaders, land owners and neighbouring communities, is essential to ensure broad local support and avoid conflict. National fisheries agencies need to ensure that people in remote communities have access to market information, scientific and legal knowledge, and technical expertise.



Build partnerships

Efforts to develop coastal fisheries should not be designed as small, isolated and non-replicable projects. By working in close collaboration with other government agencies, provincial governments and civil society groups, activities can be sustainable over the long term and benefit a larger number of people. Participatory processes and innovations are not compatible with rigid time frames, predetermined activities and fixed budgets, but require flexibility, creativity, open communication, experiential learning and, above all, long-term engagement. Many initiatives fail due to practical problems that could have been easily overcome.



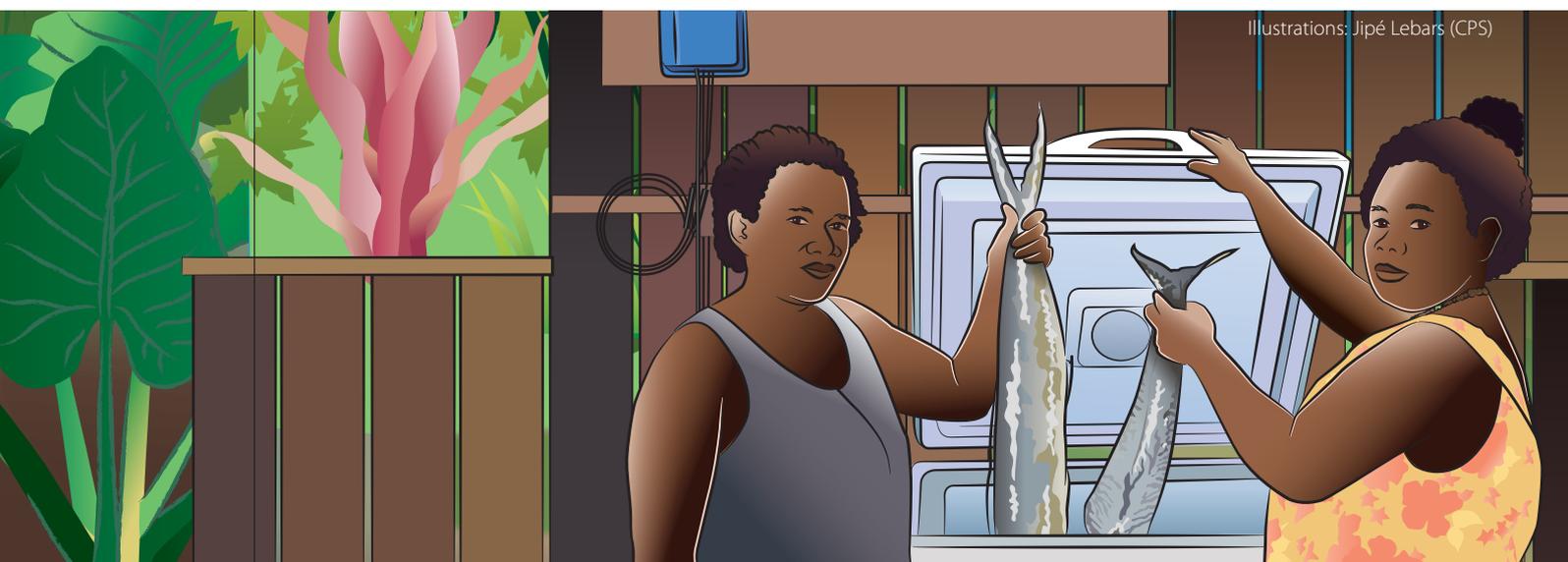
Improve public services

Social and economic development obviously requires more than community-based approaches. Investments in public infrastructure, such as wharfs, roads and markets, are needed to improve the well-being of fishing communities. Likewise, it is essential to enforce existing environmental legislation and protect indigenous people's rights. Where necessary, design transparent and accountable decision-making processes for high-value coastal export commodities such as beche-de-mer, which are robust to political interference, in order to ensure public confidence in national fisheries agencies.



Designing local solutions for local problems

Small-island developing states in the Pacific face a unique set of governance and development challenges. To unlock the economic potential of marine resources, the region must carve out its own approach to coastal fisheries development. The development trajectory of other countries may be of little pertinence to the Pacific. Much can be gained by building on the traditional values of Pacific communities, such as self-reliance, cooperation and stewardship of land and sea.



Illustrations: Jipé Lebars (CPS)

Box 1: Solar freezers

Ice is a prerequisite for storing and transporting fresh fish. Since the 1970s, fisheries agencies have tried to modernise coastal fisheries by investing in ice-making plants. Numerous fisheries centres have been constructed throughout the region to facilitate trade and boost the cash economy. However, despite significant financial investments, few of these large-scale facilities remain up and running due to high operational and maintenance costs. In remote and rural villages a more appropriate and cost-effective alternative can be to enable women's groups to operate solar-powered freezers to store fish and other food products. Experiments in Solomon Islands have demonstrated that women's groups can operate a profitable and inclusive community-based enterprise by renting out freezer space. These community-based enterprises generate income and improve food security, thereby benefiting many people for a fraction of the cost of regionally located large infrastructure. Private sector (e.g. shop owners) may also be a possible model for spreading small-scale cold storage service. However, the technology is not fool-proof: solar technology and the associated electronics is vulnerable to failure in rural Pacific environments where servicing for maintenance is far away and expensive.

Box 2: Community-based fisheries management

Sustainable fisheries management can substantially increase productivity, and thereby improve food security and incomes. Many resource owners and communities regulate fishing in their area in order to allow fish, crabs and shellfish to recover. When the need arises, resources are harvested, for example to raise funds for communal activities, pay school fees or feed guests. The explicit goal of community-based fisheries management is to secure the long-term improvement of rural livelihoods. In practice, however, fisheries management has often been equated with creating marine protected areas where fishing is completely banned. To compensate communities and reduce people's dependency on marine resources, civil society groups have implemented alternative livelihood projects. But diversifying livelihoods has proven to be notoriously difficult, and easily detracts attention from improving fisheries management. Community-based fisheries management can only succeed if fishers benefit from it. The converse also holds true, particularly in the long term: fishers benefit if community-based fisheries management succeeds. Alternative fishing resources can also be experimented with, such as underutilised species that can be beneficial for further development. Such species include diamondback squid, *loligo* squid, small pelagic fish such as sardinella, anchovies, sprats and mackerel scads.

Box 3: Assessing livelihoods innovations

Community-based approaches are based on the premise that people themselves know best what could work in their village, and that they should, therefore, have a say in what kind of development activities are promoted. Yet, determining whether an innovation is economically viable, socially appropriate and ecologically sustainable is notoriously difficult. Who is entitled to fish at the new fish aggregating device (FAD)? How much work is needed to harvest and dry seaweed, and who will buy the produce? Who will repair the solar freezer when it breaks down? How much money is needed to transport mud crabs to the market, and what to do when the ship does not arrive? There is a tendency to overestimate positive impacts and underestimate the potential costs and risks when assessing a new income-generating activity. The "new idea" tool provides guiding questions to critically evaluate livelihood innovations. The tool can help extension officers and community organisers to guide discussions and ensure that all aspects of a proposed activity are taken into account.

See: <https://coastfish.spc.int/en/component/content/article/509>

Box 4: Knowledge brokers

In recent decades, a wealth of information has been documented on coastal fisheries development and management in the Pacific. The SPC Fisheries, Aquaculture and Marine Ecosystems (FAME) Division maintains a digital library (<https://fame.spc.int/en/publications/digital-library>) with technical reports, tools, manuals and case studies on fisheries development and management. Government agencies and civil society organisations can play an important role as "knowledge brokers" by providing information to rural communities, and ensuring that realistic and feasible decisions are made that fit local conditions and values.

“Only a concerted effort to improve the management of coastal fisheries and provide alternative livelihoods and protein sources can prevent a decline in fish supplies and further degradation of the coastal environment. Traditional ‘top-down’ management is not working and there is a need to empower coastal communities to manage and use their fisheries resources sustainably.”
– Future of fisheries: A regional roadmap for sustainable Pacific fisheries

“Historically, the focus of fisheries agencies has been on development and commercial fisheries – tuna in particular. Now, however, with the ongoing livelihoods and food security benefits of good coastal fisheries management being clear, it is time for governments to ensure an appropriate level of resources to secure the considerable benefits that flow from the sustainable management of coastal fisheries.” – A new song for coastal fisheries – pathways to change: the Noumea strategy

“An important lesson is that we cannot force development on people; we cannot impose it on them and expect them to change. Development is a process that people must pursue at their own pace, but what the government can do is provide the necessary supporting infrastructure and facilities that will enable people to develop at their own pace and with the resources that they have available to them.” – Transform Aqorau, CEO of iTUNA Intel

“National policy development for coastal fisheries management is making steady progress, however, the distance between policy and action remains high.” – Pacific Islands Forum Coastal Fisheries Working Group

Further reading:

Coastal Fisheries Working Group. 2019. A call to leaders: Most urgent actions required for sustaining or increasing the contribution of coastal fisheries to our communities. Noumea, New Caledonia: Pacific Community.

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Govan H., Eriksson H., Batalofo M., Duarte A., Sukulu M., Lawless S., Tilley A. and van der Ploeg J. 2019. A new idea for coastal fisheries: Asking the right questions to enhance coastal livelihoods. Noumea, New Caledonia: Pacific Community.

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This document contributes to achieving outcome #4 of “A new song for coastal fisheries – pathways to change: the Noumea Strategy”: Refocused fisheries agencies that are transparent, accountable, and adequately resourced, supporting coastal fisheries management and sustainable development, underpinned by community-based ecosystem approaches to fisheries management.

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