

# The Pacific Ways

The geography, histories and cultures of the Pacific island region, and its 14 small island developing states, represent unique challenges and opportunities

Situated within a vast ocean area of over 28 mn sq km in the western and central Pacific Ocean, the Pacific Islands region consists of 14 independent countries and eight territories. They have a collective population of approximately 11 mn. The combined land area is only 553,000 sq km (less than 2 per cent of the total ocean area under their jurisdiction), of which 90 per cent is under customary ownership.

In the Pacific Islands region, small-scale fisheries—generally called ‘coastal fisheries’ here—is very much a subsistence activity rather than commercial. The annual subsistence catch of 102,780 tonnes in 2014 was more than double the commercial catch of 46,288 tonnes in the 14 Pacific Island countries. Of the total fisheries production, the combined coastal catch accounts for only about 7.5 per cent; offshore-based large-scale fisheries account for the rest. Over 80 per cent of the coastal catch is used for subsistence in Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea, which together account for 87 per cent of the region’s population. In Kiribati, the annual per capita fish consumption is estimated at 181.6 kg; in some remote atolls, this exceeds 250 kg. Subsistence fishing is a significant part of the gross domestic product (GDP), accounting for about 22 per cent of the GDP from the whole of the region’s fishing sector. Fish caught in lagoons, reefs and shallow sea areas are thus an important source of nutrition, culture, welfare and employment.

Regrettably, the coastal fishery resources in the Pacific Islands are showing signs of depletion, especially in areas close to population centres. The volume of fish trade is increasing, in general, as a means of generating cash income. A few key species

from the coastal catch are sold as high-value marine products to the rapidly growing Asian economies. This includes dried sea cucumber (*bêche-de-mer*), estimated at 1,500 tonnes per annum, trochus (roughly 2,300 tonnes annually), live reef fish species (considerably less than 1,500 tonnes), pearl oysters and corals. As the incentive to export has intensified over the years, some of these export-oriented fisheries have interfered with traditional sources of food (for example, giant clam) or even been destructive (for example, of both live reef food fish and aquarium fish trade). In some cases, the benefits of export fisheries are concentrated in a few individuals, while the adverse side-effects may be experienced by many. For instance, fishers tend to only capture a small percentage of the end retail value, with middlemen and exporters reaping a higher portion of the benefit. Therefore, although fisheries exports provide important opportunities for income generation, there are trade-offs with local food provision or protection of communities’ social and cultural ways of living, and could work to reinforce power asymmetry among different market actors.

## Expanding population

Coastal fisheries are also increasingly affected by habitat degradation from urbanization and siltation from mining and logging. Facing a rapidly expanding population, too, which is likely to place excessive demands on a stagnant or decreasing amount of food and employment from coastal fishing, it is important to balance newer pressures, challenges and opportunities brought by economic, infrastructure and market developments.

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The governance of coastal fisheries in the Pacific is characterized by two different management systems – local management in rural areas driven at village level (and often with customary origins); central government management through formalized fisheries laws and instruments designed and enforced by national and provincial/island-level agencies; and emerging from these two realities is what might be described as a hybridised approach of community-based management (prominently documented by the works of Bob Johannes and Ken Ruddle), where pre-existing knowledge and resource ownership systems are locally negotiated and combined into a modern set of management practices and processes. Coastal fisheries, therefore, represents a fluid and complex space to govern and offer formidable challenges to national ministries, fishing communities as well as civil society organizations (CSOs) and regional bodies active in the fisheries sector.

Against this backdrop, the introduction of the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (or the SSF Guidelines) is an ambitious global-level policy pledge designed to provide overarching guidance towards improving the governance of small-scale fisheries around the world. But how relevant are they for the Pacific Island coastal fisheries? What do policy actors in the region think of them? Will they be implemented, and if so, which elements will receive most attention?

### Fresh guidance?

The SSF Guidelines were developed through an elaborate and intensive consultative process involving numerous—over 20—national and regional stakeholder meetings between 2011 and 2014. Since receiving endorsement in the 31st session of the Committee on Fisheries (COFI) of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) in June 2014, the SSF Guidelines have been enthusiastically promoted by a wide range of stakeholders including representatives of NGOs, CSOs, fisher



At the 3rd WSFC, seven representatives of civil society, government, research and inter-governmental organizations gathered at Chiang Mai to discuss the way forward for Pacific Island fisheries

organizations, intergovernmental organizations, development funders, academic researchers and the fisheries ministries of several countries such as Norway, Canada, Tanzania, Indonesia and Peru.

In comparison to other regions, however, excitement about the SSF Guidelines has been slow to reach the Pacific Islands. In the 2014 COFI meeting, only four Pacific island states (Cook Islands, Fiji, Tonga and Tuvalu) were members of the Committee and

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were on hand to physically endorse the SSF Guidelines. Likewise, an independent study by Zaidy Nisa found that Pacific representation was sparse from the zero draft process and the many consultations. Furthermore, some of the bigger and well-integrated regional CSOs such as the Locally Managed Marine Areas (LMMAs) network and other major NGOs representing coastal communities were notably absent from the one consultation held in the Pacific region (co-organized by the Pacific Community, SPC, in Noumea in 2012).

The relative lack of awareness about the SSF Guidelines and their

national implementation is, in fact, not unexpected for at least two reasons. Externally, the Pacific Islands are geographically distant from the policy centres of the world like the European Union and the United States, which host the FAO, the World Bank as well as many influential universities, think-tanks and donor agencies, creating a relative difficulty in being included in global forums. Unless a policy initiative is driven, or strongly backed, by the Pacific actors themselves, including governments, regional bodies and major CSOs (as was the case regarding the establishment of the exclusive economic zone in the 1970s and in the climate-change-related negotiations in present times), or unless a rigorous effort is applied by extra-regional actors to elevate Pacific representation (particularly challenging in the case of coastal fisheries, given that customary owners of coastal areas reside at the local community level), the region will likely remain on the margins of global policy discussions.

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Fisheries in the Pacific Islands, the 2008 Apia policy, the 2015-2024 Melanesian Spearhead Group Roadmap for Inshore Fisheries Management and Sustainable Development, and the 2015 Noumea strategy: the 'New Song', and Future of Fisheries: A Regional Roadmap for Sustainable Pacific Fisheries. A certain familiarity with regional processes and more contextualized policy products (that is, national fisheries agencies have been part of drafting these documents) have likely contributed to the awareness of regional guidelines over the SSF Guidelines so far. As a result, many government fisheries officers in the region have not heard of the SSF Guidelines, let alone have been

using it to guide their countries' coastal fisheries management programmes. This was evident from our first-hand experiences as well as a recent study in which some of the authors were involved (see 'Multi-scale policy diffusion and translation in Pacific Island coastal fisheries in the 'For more' box below for more details). What is encouraging, though, is the high degree of thematic overlap, or policy coherence, between the SSF Guidelines and the region-specific documents mentioned above (see Figure 1). In fact, that the SSF Guidelines should be actively linked to the existing regional and national policies is a point explicitly made as early as in the 2012 FAO-SPC-led consultation held in Noumea, and similarly at the SPC Heads of Fisheries meeting in 2015.

### **Towards integration and implementation**

The 3rd World Small-scale Fisheries Congress held in Chiang Mai, Thailand, in October 2018 presented an opportunity to draw together the expertise of community practitioners, civil society, government, research and intergovernmental actors from across the Pacific region. They reflected on the values of global, regional and national policy instruments—on their use in an integrated and complementary way—for supporting communities and governments. The Congress hosted a panel with seven senior representatives from the Fiji LMMA network, the international LMMA network, WorldFish, the Fiji Women in Fisheries Network, FAO Subregional Office for the Pacific Islands and the national government fisheries agencies of Kiribati, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. The insights from the panelists are summarised below, and provide the Pacific ways forward in benefiting from the SSF Guidelines.

### **Opportunities for walking the talk**

As mentioned earlier, recognizing the high degree of concordance with the existing array of Pacific regional coastal fisheries policies will be the first crucial step for supporting a more robust and seamless integration of the SSF Guidelines. It is worth keeping in mind that regional policies are usually

developed with the direct involvement of national fisheries officers (with the presence of NGOs) and thus based on country experiences and fisheries officers' priorities. In the case of Kiribati, the Noumea Strategy (the New Song) is, at the time of writing, the only commitment being utilized, as its national fisheries ministry works in close collaboration with SPC and a donor-funded community-based fisheries management project supported by the Australian Centre of International Agricultural Research (see 'Pathways project' in the reference list below for more information). The identified coherence of the SSF Guidelines with existing regional policies will help minimize the implementation burden the countries may be under owing to the presence of a number of comparable policies. As such, the practical approach to generally support the implementation of the SSF Guidelines would be through these existing regional platforms.

### **New benchmarks and focus areas**

Prioritising the use of the regional policies, such as the Noumea Strategy, will offer sufficient basis for delivering on many key focus areas. Yet there are themes that the SSF Guidelines emphasise better and uniquely, such as human rights, the impact of climate change, gender, fisher and community representation and the benefits of post-harvest activities and international trade. This provides opportunities for partner organizations such as FAO and individual NGOs to strengthen contributions of these themes, while adding value by creating synergy and generally supporting the momentum of the regional and national policies.

### **Bottom-up responsiveness and innovations together with top-down guidance and principles**

There has been considerable progress in the production of national fisheries policies and related instruments. Solomon Islands, for example, has the 2015-2018 Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources Corporate Plan, a revision to the Fisheries Management Act 2015 and associated Fisheries Management Regulations; these include provisions in line with the SSF

		SSF Guidelines	New Song
(a)	Strong in both policies	Tenure rights Gender and social equality Equitable access to resources and benefits Co-/community-based management Human and social development Political recognition and will	
(b)	Strong in New Song	Institutional coordination and strengthening Monitoring, research, awareness raising integrated approaches	
(c)	Weak in New Song	Post-harvest economic development Fisher participation	
(d)	Absent from New Song	Human rights Impacts of climate change Impacts of international fish trade Management for sustainability	

Figure: Thematic overlaps between the SSF Guidelines and the Noumea Strategy (the New Song)

Guidelines (see the above-mentioned article 'Multi-scale policy diffusion and translation in Pacific Island coastal fisheries' for more details). Also in draft form are the Solomon Islands Fisheries Sector Policy and the National Ocean Policy.

Yet the actual work plan of the coastal fisheries staff in many Pacific Island countries is often determined less by the overarching 'top-down' guidance of policy necessary for principled governing, and more by reacting to stimuli and on-ground circumstances that warrant immediate, though measured, responses. This can include requests of support in letters from the communities themselves, for instance, to assist with curbing destructive fishing practices. Another ad hoc trigger that influences a work plan can come via political interventions, for example, when a Member of Parliament makes a direct request to the fisheries office for a certain action.

Outcomes of marine and socioeconomic surveys and gender-disaggregated data collection are designed to shape the direction of policy contextualization. For instance, Vanuatu is implementing an app-based data collection system called 'Tails Plus', which collects data on catch, market and consumption from fishers and traders to provide a statistical

basis for management decisions. It is not the lack of policy that constrains the governments per se, rather the abundant operational and political issues that arise from time to time, not the least of which is the insufficient capacity and resources to implement policies. Consider the example of the average annual government expenditure on coastal fisheries management; it is US\$ 1-2 mn in the Pacific Island countries combined. All these point to the need to consider the in-country implementation feedback and hurdles that inevitably shape the strategic adoption of policies.

### **Support of partner organizations**

Since its inception in 1971, SPC has been the major provider of technical assistance on the development and management of coastal fisheries. The FAO is another example of partner support for the 14 Pacific Island countries. The FAO Subregional Office for the Pacific Islands, through its five-year Multi-Country Programming Framework for the Pacific, facilitates in-country, multi-stakeholder consultations to identify focus areas for technical assistance to address food security and nutrition challenges in the region, including issues related to small-scale fisheries and the implementation of the SSF Guidelines. A greater role and place for CSOs in the national and regional policy-making processes is also strongly encouraged. Synergistic support, meshed with existing regional characteristics, diverse needs and a co-operative spirit will likely offer the most achievable and meaningful way of creating a lasting impact.

Securing the benefits of coastal resources for the well-being of the Pacific people—now and into the future—will require a concerted effort from the national governments, based on their firm resolve and the ongoing promotion of communities to be the stewards of fisheries resources in a changing world. At the same time, targeted support by the global, regional and national-level and civil society partner organizations that enhances the Pacific ways of advancing coastal fisheries. This contribution will be crucial. There will be much to gain

from seeking complementarity in the existing policies and also understanding the way policy implementation actually takes place in-country. 3

### **For more**

<http://www.fao.org/3/i9297en/i9297EN.pdf>

#### **Fisheries of the Pacific Islands: Regional and national information**

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/329179384\\_Multi-scale\\_policy\\_diffusion\\_and\\_translation\\_in\\_Pacific\\_Island\\_coastal\\_fisheries](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/329179384_Multi-scale_policy_diffusion_and_translation_in_Pacific_Island_coastal_fisheries)

#### **Multi-scale policy diffusion and translation in Pacific Island coastal fisheries**

[http://www.spc.int/DigitalLibrary/Doc/FAME/InfoBull/TRAD/38/Trad38\\_26\\_Song.pdf](http://www.spc.int/DigitalLibrary/Doc/FAME/InfoBull/TRAD/38/Trad38_26_Song.pdf)

#### **Policies in harmony? Does the New Song agree with the Small-Scale Fisheries Guidelines?**

<https://www.facebook.com/Pathwayscbfm>

#### **Strengthening and scaling community-based approaches to Pacific coastal fisheries management in support of the New Song (Pathways project)**

<https://fish.cgiar.org/news-and-updates/news/senior-pacific-officials-commit-promoting-small-scale-fisheries-national>

#### **Senior Pacific officials commit to promoting small-scale fisheries in national policies**

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1aux18aaur3NW4UzpOmKJBkKzmzY25non/view>

#### **Preliminary review of public expenditure of the Fisheries Agencies of Pacific Island Countries and Territories: Policy, operational budget and staffing support for coastal fisheries**

[www.icsf.net/en/samudra/article/EN/77-4314-Entry-Points-fo.html](http://www.icsf.net/en/samudra/article/EN/77-4314-Entry-Points-fo.html)

#### **Entry Points for Gender by Aliti Vunisea, Samudra Report No.77, September 2017**