

# Strengthening Fisheries Management in Vanuatu - Keys to achieving Millennium Development Goals

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## Introduction

The Republic of Vanuatu is an archipelago of some 83 islands in the southwest Pacific with a population of 221,000 predominantly Melanesian people with over 110 different cultural-linguistic groups. It remains a UN LDC with a per-capita GDP of US \$1500 that has been increasing 5-7% per annum over the last 3 years (Gay 2008). This increase is largely attributed to the forces of globalization and the adoption of a foreign-investor led growth policy, especially the development of coastal real estate<sup>1</sup> and associated services industry as well as tourism (*op. cit.*). This growth has been concentrated largely in the two urban centers where 20% of the population resides. The 80 % rural population relies largely on an agricultural and fisheries based economy where people continue to live on their traditional lands. The disparity in economic growth reflects the strongly dichotomous nature of Vanuatu's economy: the formal economy operating in the urban centers and the informal or 'traditional economy' of rural areas.

In fact, throughout much of Melanesia, people continue to live a subsistence-based lifestyle based on pre-existing knowledge systems and where it may be said there is virtually no unemployment and people enjoy a significant amount of leisure time. These knowledge systems include support and barter networks amongst extended families along with customary land and marine tenure systems that allocate access rights within kinship groups. In Vanuatu, the traditional, largely non-monetarised, rural economy has successfully managed to absorb a 90% rural population increase since Independence in 1980 without resulting in food shortages or a landless class of people (Bazeley & Mullin 2006). In this context, the MDG concept of 'poverty' needs close consideration, as much of the capital possessed by ni-Vanuatu such as traditional rights to land and resources and social capital in the form of exchange networks is not captured by the GDP. In fact, while it is estimated that 51% of rural people live on less than USD\$ 1/day (Gay 2008), there is very little real poverty (with the exception of some makeshift urban settlements) and in 2006, Vanuatu was given recognition as the "happiest country in the world" by the UK-based New Economics Foundation that published "The Happy Planet Index". This ranking was based on the use of three indicators of well being: life satisfaction, life expectancy and ecological footprint that reflect resource use sustainability.

## Economic value of offshore, coastal and nearshore fisheries

While the fisheries sector currently accounts for merely 1% of the GDP (*op. cit.*), this is a misleading indication of its national contribution as a 2006 agricultural census indicates 86% of rural and 48% of urban people (for an overall mean of 78%) depend on nearshore and coastal fishing for subsistence and or income generation, up from a mean of 61% in the 1999 survey. In fact, the value of the nearshore subsistence catch in most Pacific nations, including Vanuatu, is estimated to be worth more in economic terms than commercial coastal catches (Dalzell et. al. 1996). For Vanuatu, it was estimated that the nominal value<sup>2</sup> of the annual subsistence catch totaled USD \$1,953,360 while the commercial coastal catch was valued at USD \$1,514,364 giving a total for both of 3,467,724 (*op. cit.*). Interestingly, both of these figures exceed the value from resource rental from foreign flagged vessels to access offshore tuna resources, estimated at USD \$1,000,000 for Vanuatu (DoF 2007).

Nearshore catches are also generally made with minimal capital investments; often from shore over fringing reef flats or along reef drop-offs or lagoons from outrigger canoes. Monofilament nets, free-diving gear and spearguns, handlines and traditional methods (reef gleaning, spears, traps, etc.) are typically used.

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<sup>1</sup> On the central island of Efate, extensive coastal areas are now alienated largely for expatriate housing and some tourism development. Conflicts over access to traditional fishing grounds are becoming increasingly common as luxury subdivisions now displace access by reef custodians to marine resources as well as the ability to monitor and manage them, thus contributing to the erosion of customary marine tenure systems.

<sup>2</sup> Their monetary value for the purposes of this study was calculated based on what they would have sold for. Access to fresh, nutritious seafood also assists in import substitution and to alleviate Vanuatu's trade imbalance.

While coastal and offshore waters are normally restricted to men and the use of powerboats, access to the nearshore is widely available to women and children. Women's contribution to fisheries in the Pacific is often understated and under-acknowledged. The nearshore fisheries remain critically important to virtually all islands of Vanuatu in promoting easily accessible household food and social security and diversification of livelihoods including for revenue that may be used to pay for education. The nearshore fisheries continue to rely on a large corpus of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK), held by both men and women for enhancing catches, as well as preparing, preserving and managing these resources.

### **Nearshore fisheries management, CMT, TEK and education**

Aside from national fisheries regulations that impose size limits on some nearshore commercial resources like trochus, beche-de-mer and green snail, protect turtles and control the export of marine products, the management of the nearshore reefs is primarily vested with the traditional reef custodians through customary marine tenure (CMT). CMT is legally recognized in Vanuatu's Constitution and provides the rights for people to manage their land and reefs as they have traditionally done for centuries.

Vanuatu has a strong heritage of managing resources through CMT and a combination of traditional knowledge, beliefs and practices that include privileged user's rights, species specific prohibitions, seasonal closures, food avoidance, gear restrictions, behavioral prohibitions and spatial-temporal refugia (Hickey 2007). The Department of Fisheries actively supports customary practices and recognizes CMT as a viable, decentralized system of resource management that fosters a sense of responsibility amongst communities to manage their own resources well. Traditional village leaders also continue to view the management of resources under their tenure as their traditional responsibility and that draws upon pre-existing, restorative community-based systems of dispute resolution. Communities and their leaders also took up the role of monitoring and enforcing national regulations once aware of them and their underlying rationale (Johannes and Hickey 2004). This service saves government considerable funds (that could be used towards improving education) from attempting to centrally manage resources throughout the archipelago.

Many elders retain a range of TEK including resource specific spatial-temporal distribution including for spawning migrations and aggregations, preferred habitats, traditional fishing calendars, environmental cues, linguistic skills and other management relevant knowledge. This knowledge and capacity need be mobilized into community-based nearshore reef management plans. However, many donor driven projects often ignore pre-existing knowledge systems (Ruddle and Hickey, 2008) and this leads to their further marginalization and attrition. However, with the lack of human resource and financial capacity of many Pacific nations, they are often obliged to accept western-based approaches in order to access these funds.

The promotion of universal education often implies western education that in many cases lacks local context and the acknowledgement of Pacific knowledge systems. Formal education must include TEK that has produced the food and social security throughout the Pacific in order to ensure the value of this knowledge is known and trusted by youth. Given recent food price increases, this is increasingly important.

In summary, it is critical that the MDGs are implemented within the existing cultural and social context of the Pacific islands, with special recognition of the traditional economy, CMT and TEK and the importance of incorporating these knowledge systems into formal education in order for them to sustainably contribute to economic and human development and not undermine the values and knowledge systems that provides economic self-reliance and resilience as well as cultural identity. Thorough consultation with community and traditional leaders as well as government personnel regarding the most appropriate ways to support these knowledge systems in the implementation of MDGs would assist towards this end.

### **References**

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