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## Customary marine tenure in the South Pacific: the uses and challenges of mapping

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### · Introduction

The current world-wide crisis facing fisheries, and the apparent inability of centralised agencies responsible for fisheries management to deal with the crisis, have encouraged an increasing interest in alternative forms of managing fisheries resources. Among the forms of management that have attracted the attention of researchers are the numerous customary mechanisms found in the Southern and Western Pacific. On the reefs and lagoons of the Melanesian islands, a wide range of measures are still widely used. These appear to ensure some level of sustainability in the harvesting of fish and shellfish which form a key element in the livelihoods of local people.

These customary arrangements have persisted in spite of increasing commercialisation of fisheries and appear to adapt to changing circumstances. This has provoked interest among fisheries policy makers and planners as the incorporation of such mechanisms into wider fisheries management strategies offers many advantages. By definition these arrangements should be locally acceptable, they are generally 'self-policing' and they encourage the decentralisation of decision-making.

In contrast, the costs of centrally-imposed regulation of coastal fisheries is high and they are often not effective in the management of tropical, multi-species fisheries with large numbers of small, opportunistic fishing activities. In this context, there is interest in making use of existing, well-established arrangements. Various forms of 'co-management', which combine some of the

methods of fisheries researchers with the knowledge and skills of local resource-users, have been investigated and introduced with some success in Fiji, Vanuatu and other countries in the region.

### Customary marine tenure

Customary forms of tenure over marine areas is one set of mechanisms frequently encountered in the region which is widely interpreted as a form of management of marine resources. Recent research has investigated both the impact of customary tenure and the social and cultural features of marine tenure systems in Fiji and Vanuatu. It aims to determine how appropriate it is to incorporate customary tenure systems, which control resource-use, into more formal systems of fisheries management. A range of marine tenure areas in Fiji and Vanuatu are being monitored and the conditions of resources under different forms of tenure arrangement and different forms of control have been compared.

In order to make sense of observed differences in resources, an understanding of the social and cultural features of the tenure systems, as well as the economic forces affecting levels of fisheries activity in different areas, was crucial. As the first step in the work, PRA was planned in each area involving both the biologists concerned with the monitoring of resources and a social scientist.

### PRA tools - extraction and intervention

The PRA techniques employed included the use of semi-structured interviews with individuals and groups of respondents. During the interviews, various mapping, timelines and

ranking tools were used. These encouraged local people to analyse and discuss patterns of resource use and the ways in which tenure can influence resource exploitation.

The mapping of marine tenure areas showed that the notion of 'tenure' is in most cases different from the western notion of some kind of exclusive control of clearly defined areas.

The frequency with which members of different tribal or clan groups with adjacent tenure areas would claim different boundaries appeared, at first sight, to be simply a question of competing claims for potentially valuable resources. But discussions over sketch maps of tenure areas clarified that there was more at stake (see Figure 1).

**Fig. 1. Claims to marine tenure areas on Uliveo Island, Maskelyne Islands, Vanuatu**

Disclaimer: All details shown on this map are based on unofficial spoken accounts given by a range of local people and shown for illustrative purposes only. The details shown, including all borders, are approximate and do not, in any way, indicate any officially recognised claim to any of the areas shown.



The land and sea areas associated with different clans and tribes are an integral and inseparable part of that group's identity and the identity of all its members. But it is also clear that the identity generated by tenure over a particular area comes less from controlling it and protecting it from others, but from sharing it. The notion of customary tenure emphasises the importance of an area as an instrument of exchange in dealing with other tribes and clans and in defining different degrees of relationship with those other groups.

The intrinsic value of an area's resources appears only of secondary importance. The exclusive right to use them probably had little meaning until the recent advent of commercialised fisheries and the possibility of generating income through the sale of fishing rights in customary tenure areas. This has implications for the notion of protecting the resources within tenure areas for the future. In a quite profound sense those resources seem to acquire meaning by being shared with others.

It is notable that, in Fiji, the process of mapping customary tenure areas, both on land and sea, during the course of the British colonial period seems to have had a seriously disruptive impact on the whole notion of 'property'. Boundaries which had always been mobile and subject to dispute and negotiation became fixed. This removed an important element in the interactions between the various tribes and clans which exercised tenure. The drawing of boundaries by the authorities inevitably seems to have involved a decision to believe one version of 'who owns what' rather than the opinions of many others. Needless to say, as these boundaries begin to acquire a different, economic meaning (e.g. with the penetration of tourism and commercial concerns), the disputes over boundaries and 'ownership' are becoming increasingly acrimonious.

The research team itself risked becoming part of a similar process in Vanuatu. In some communities, the arrival of an outside team asking questions about tenure over marine areas seemed to escalate into claims to different areas. This was indicative of how flexible are the tenure systems. In such circumstances the act of drawing a sketch map could become charged with political overtones

and interpretations. In one specific case, tenure was explained to the team in terms of rival ancestral claims going back ten generations.

Our understanding of the concepts of tenure and property which were generated by these mapping exercises, and subsequent discussion of them, underpinned one of the principal findings of the research to date. This is that customary marine tenure, at least until very recently, has had little to do with the conservation of marine resources, at least in the minds of local resource-users. This does not necessarily mean that customary marine tenure is not a valid instrument for fisheries management. But it is an important factor to be considered when customary mechanisms are being used as a means to implement fisheries management with a view to resource conservation.

The study encountered numerous cases where traditional measures that were adapted to exploitation control for the purpose of 'conserving resources' (e.g. taboos) were systematically ignored by resource-users. In contrast, equivalent measures imposed for 'customary' purposes, such as to mark the death of chief or to demonstrate the relative status of one resource owner over another, were more frequently observed. The exercise of customary marine tenure rights makes sense in its own cultural context for customary reasons, but does not necessarily make sense when a new rationale, such as marine resource conservation, is added.

### **Issues - research and intervention**

Mapping techniques proved useful during the research but they also highlighted some of the problems associated with participative research. It is clear that, while assisting in stimulating a discussion of the issues with which the research was concerned, the activity itself constituted an intervention in the situation being researched. Awareness among local people that the lines which they drew on the sand were being noted down in a notebook by the researchers significantly influenced the responses being given. This was so, even if the researcher was at pains to record what was being said after the interview, rather than during it. The presence of interested outsiders

appeared to be a powerful symbol of official ratification.

Similarly, questions about resources and their management would stimulate responses that tended to exaggerate the environmental motivations behind certain interventions. Awareness of the environment, and the need to preserve natural resources, was generally associated with being advanced, modern, and progressive. This had apparently been induced by recent government campaigns to raise environmental awareness through posters, radio and television. This could lead to discussions of environmental issues with community leaders becoming stimuli for action.

In one case, this led to the placing of taboo on fishing grounds. This was not necessarily based on real needs or priorities, but on a desire to be seen as active and ready to accept new ideas brought in by 'researchers'.

## • Conclusion

In different circumstances, this sort of process, where learning and analysis led directly to action to address identified issues, might be exactly what was hoped for - Participatory Learning and Action. But in the context of a research initiative, it highlights certain dangers.

Outsiders carrying out a PRA 'intervene' in local reality, even if they may do so in a way which they regard as being informal and participatory. This can foster the belief that whatever comes out of the process is the result of deliberations by those directly concerned and is therefore locally appropriate. However, the impact which the presence of outsiders can have, no matter how 'low-profile' they try to be, always needs to be taken into consideration as it can significantly alter that outcome. Alien and inappropriate concepts of organisation and

action may be exhibited, and acted upon. Local people, and particularly local leaders, may feel this is expected of them and that it represents modernity and association with the 'progressive' outside world.

In the context of participatory research for development, the opportunity exists for compensating for this through a more systematic and thorough participatory analysis of the issues involved. This could encourage local people to identify more firmly those actions which they regard as of prime importance. But without this, and an awareness on the part of the PRA team of the possible effects of their presence, there is a risk that decisions reached by local people are aimed more at the outsiders and their assumed objectives, than at the real needs and priorities of local people.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank the directors and staff of the fisheries departments of Fiji and Vanuatu, the project field managers and the Director and staff of the Marine Studies Programme at the University of the South Pacific for making this research possible. We also wish to thank the chiefs, elders and people of all the villages we have visited for their generosity and co-operation. We look forward to continuing our collaboration.

This research was funded by the British Overseas Development Administration (ODA) under their Fisheries Management Science Programme (FMSP) and implemented by the Marine Resources Assessment Group (MRAG)