The Pitfalls of Regionalism: The Participation of Pacific Island Countries in the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC)

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Introduction

Although regional cooperation has its place in the interactions between Pacific Island countries (PICs), it should not be at the expense of the PICs’ development of capacity and self-reliance. There is a place for the provision of technical support for PICs through regional agencies. However, support that creates dependency on regional agencies is self-defeating, and unsustainable. Regional cooperation is about self-determination, empowering PICs to develop their natural resources and capacities to reduce reliance on donors and regional agencies for technical and policy support.

I argue that regional agencies are undermining the local capacity of PICs by making them dependent, by spoon-feeding them in the development of conservation and management measures for tuna resources under the Western and Central Pacific Ocean Fisheries Commission (WCPFC). This is a discernable trend that has become more apparent in recent years, and through which regional co-operation can have a detrimental, rather than a positive, effect on capacity-building and self-reliance.

The WCPFC negotiation process: The increasing complexity of conservation and management measures

The WCPFC is the premier United Nations-mandated international fisheries organisation for tuna in the Western and Central Pacific Ocean (WCPO). Its membership consists of the 17 members of the Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA) and the major tuna fishing states. Its mandate covers the management and conservation of tuna, a shared natural resource found largely in the waters of PICs. The abundance of tuna is not distributed equally, but eight of the member countries supply around 60 per cent of the world’s skipjack tuna, which is the major raw material used in canned tuna.1 From 2015–2017, the catch of tuna in Kiribati’s waters alone was more than the total combined tuna catch from the eastern Pacific Ocean, Atlantic Ocean and Indian Ocean, reflecting the importance of the WCPO. A testament of the effectiveness of the WCPFC and the other fisheries organisations that form the governance structure for the fisheries management framework in the WCPO — the FFA and the Parties to the Nauru Agreement Office (PNAO) — is that the four key tuna stocks (skipjack, yellowfin, bigeye and albacore) are in the green, though bigeye and yellowfin are near their levels of full exploitation. In other oceans, at least one of the key stocks is in a state of overexploitation. The stakes are high for PICs. The economic value of the tuna fisheries is estimated at around US$5 billion. The direct returns to their treasuries are estimated at around US$500 million (FFA 2018). For the smaller PICs, revenue from tuna pays for basic social services and the salaries of public servants. The importance of the tuna resources should not be underestimated.

The nature of conservation and management measures for tuna has become complex as the WCPFC establishes a more stable environment for managing tuna. This includes harvest control rules, harvest strategies, limit reference points and target reference points. Political differences over the measures between PICs and fishing states are a constant challenge. Given the different interests of the PICs and fishing states, the negotiations can become political, often impacting the efficacy of the management measures. The WCPFC meets annually, and the political dynamics between strong versus weak and rich versus poor coastal and market states, and developed and developing states, are played out in the development of conservation and management measures for the world’s healthiest tuna stocks.

The WCPFC’s Scientific Committee analyses the status of stocks and recommends management action based on assessments by the Secretariat of the Pacific Community and the Technical and Compliance Committee. The latter provides technical analysis on the effectiveness of the measures. The paperwork required is extensive, and the nature of the scientific and technical papers is complex. The meeting sessions are long and key decisions on the management of the tropical tunas are taken during marathon sessions. In-house resources to analyse
and develop management options are usually not available in the PICs, in particular, the small fisheries administrations. This is where the support of the FFA and PNAO is critical.

The role of the FFA and the PNAO

The FFA and PNAO have dedicated staff to read, analyse and summarise meeting papers and develop a brief for PICs. This is a longstanding tradition dating back to the negotiation of the Treaty on Fisheries between the governments of PICs and the United States, the United Nations Fish Stocks Agreement and the WCPFC Convention (FFA 2018; United Nations 1995). PICs have invariably taken a collective approach towards these negotiations, whereby the regional agencies prepare briefs, summarise the papers and prepare talking points. PICs would meet weeks before the annual session of the WCPFC to develop management options. These would be prepared by the regional agencies. There have been a few exceptions where individual PICs have developed their own proposals, but they are often supported by either a regional agency or a non-governmental organisation that has a particular interest in the subject.

There is no doubt that this support is critical and, for some PICs, indispensable. However, it is having the unintended effect of creating a dependency on professional staff in these regional agencies. In recent years, with the emergence of communications technology such as Skype, this support is framed around Skype groups controlled by staff of regional agencies who sit at the back ‘orchestrating’ the negotiations taking place around the meeting table. It can be disconcerting to observe that even where talking points are prepared, the representatives have to be reminded when to speak, when to pause, or to leave out certain elements of a talking point. Sometimes the representatives are chastised for not speaking up. The over-preparation by agency staff on behalf of PICs often results in the representatives being unable to respond to follow up questions from the fishing states, revealing the real intellectual property behind the participation of PICs. While regional cooperation undoubtedly benefits PICs, it should not be at the expense of national capacity. PICs need to be alert to the dangers of dependency and an over-reliance on regional agencies, who are often unaware of the national interests of the PICs.

Conclusion

The PICs’ approach to the management of their tuna through regional agencies should be about empowering Pacific Islanders to effectively represent themselves and control their fisheries. No one knows their aspirations and interests better than themselves, and therefore it should not be left to the regional agencies to articulate these for them. Regional cooperation should be about empowerment and the building of self-reliance and capacity to engage effectively in the management of a key natural resource.

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Author notes

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Endnote

1. Federated States of Micronesia, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Tuvalu. Tokelau is also included, as although it is not part of the coalition known as the Parties to the Nauru Agreement (PNA), it participates in the Vessel Day Scheme, the major controlling management regulatory framework for tropical tuna.

References

