



One size does not fit all: Critical insights for effective community-based resource management in Melanesia



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A B S T R A C T

In recent years, Fiji's approach of combining traditional systems of community-based coastal management and modern management systems has become a successful blueprint for marine conservation, particularly the Locally Managed Marine Area (LMMA) network model. As a result of this success, conservation practitioners have imported the Fiji LMMA model to the Solomon Islands and in Vanuatu in hope of replicating the purported success attained in Fiji. This paper argues that because tenure systems and associated political systems in Fiji, the Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu are substantially different, one cannot simply extrapolate the more centralized tenurial and political Fiji model to the decentralized tenurial and politically eclectic Solomons and Vanuatu. This paper provides an analysis of some of the various approaches used in these countries to make a case for why socio-political diversity and historical particulars matter to resource management and conservation-in-practice (and for any development interventions). By examining examples of various nested and polycentric governance approaches—family, community, tribal, confederations, local community-based organizations (CBOs), and Church—it elucidates not only some of the differences between Fiji and Solomon Islands/Vanuatu, but also between Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands. This provides critical insights into some of the myriad of factors impinging on conservation aspirations in these countries and may offer some alternative ways forward not currently considered by conservation practitioners. Finally, the paper provides some guidelines to how to increase the long-term success of marine conservation programs for fisheries management and community-based management initiatives in the region.

1. Introduction

Coral reef ecosystems provide critical economic, cultural, aesthetic and subsistence services to the rural communities of Pacific Island nations. However, over recent decades these ecosystems have been increasingly threatened by local (land-based runoff and overfishing) and regional (industrial fishing and climate change) pressures. This has raised concern, particularly amongst local, regional, and northern hemisphere non-government organizations (NGOs) as well as regional multilateral and state donor agencies. Simultaneously, numerous efforts at safeguarding marine ecosystems in the region have been attempted, ranging from externally driven top down initiatives to informal, ad-hoc grass roots initiatives. More prominently, community-based marine conservation efforts have expanded across the Pacific Islands (e.g., [23,53,65]), as human activities have begun to impact previously healthy and biodiverse marine habitats [15,2,60]. Of all Island nations, Fiji's approach of combining traditional systems of coastal management

and modern management systems (e.g., [63,64]) has become a successful model for marine conservation to be emulated by other nation states via the efforts of government agencies, local stakeholders, NGOs, and other donors.

Perhaps the most successful approach has been the Locally Managed Marine Area (LMMA) network (www.lmmanetwork.org) which was born from a handful of communities in Fiji collaborating with the University of the South Pacific to develop local management strategies to address declining invertebrate stocks [59]. The Fiji LMMA or FLMMA approach empowers local stakeholders to use their coastal systems of customary management to establish locally-managed marine areas for sustainable marine resource management and conservation. The FLMMA approach has become a “synonym” for community-based marine resource management (CBMRM) that may or may not utilize a co-management strategy (with government, NGO or donor partners) [16,66] and has multiple objectives beyond merely enhancing sustainable fisheries (e.g., [37]). Today, FLMMA's aim to improve short-term

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harvesting efficiency, restore biodiversity and ecosystem health, increase food security for coastal peoples, reinforce custom, enhance livelihoods, and empower local communities through the recognition of their ancestral rights, amongst other benefits [24,28,37,44,61]. This approach is also deemed to provide a mechanism for communities to work together in a collective, to share knowledge and gain new tools to manage coastal ecosystems [37]. In light of the success and spread of this approach in Fiji and elsewhere in the region, conservation practitioners have imported the FLMMMA model of community based resource management to the Solomon Islands and in Vanuatu in hope of replicating the apparent success attained in Fiji. The approach has become a resource management ‘blueprint’; the conservation equivalent to “fast policy” where ideas born in one locale are quickly transferred to another location (e.g., [49]). Indeed, resource managers do acknowledge that marine resources are being over-exploited in Fiji [22] and accept that communities across the country may differ from one another in terms of their conservation efforts (e.g., implementation of “taboos”) and outcomes [36]. Yet, notwithstanding these acknowledgments, conservation practitioners accept the FLMMMA approach as the best model to follow under the prevailing political, economic, and cultural circumstances of Fiji and the Pacific more generally (e.g., [25,37]). Thus, the LMMA blueprint is being exported beyond Fiji and current conservation approaches and practices suggest that incoming managers and conservation practitioners (from various NGOs) in the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu have the underlying assumption that “Melanesian” countries share a similar political and social-cultural context, chiefly forms of political hierarchies and customary management, and inclusive customary marine tenure.

Based on analysis of various resource management approaches and the authors’ experience in researching and establishing conservation programs in the region, this paper argues that the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu are *not* Fiji. Examining a variety of local institutional organizations in both countries, this paper argues that exporting the LMMA model of community-based resource management may not find the same traction in these contexts as in Fiji. There is no doubt that the LMMA model has been successful in Fiji and continues to provide a powerful example of the effectiveness of bottom-up management [19,37]. However, the spread to other areas of the Pacific has been largely based on this success in Fiji with limited assessment of how the sociocultural diversity and historical particulars of other regions may impinge on the effectiveness of the neat transfer of the LMMA model.

This paper also provides an analysis of approaches to resource management at different organizational levels in the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu to make a case for why socio-political diversity and historical particulars matter to resource management and conservation-in-practice and, in fact, for any other developmental intervention (albeit this is not discussed here). By examining examples of various nested and polycentric governance approaches—family, community, tribal, confederations, local community-based organizations (CBOs), and Church—it elucidates not only some of the differences between Fiji and Solomon Islands/Vanuatu, but also between Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands. This provides critical insights into some of the myriad factors impinging on conservation aspirations in these countries and may offer some alternative ways forward not currently considered in the LMMA/CBMRM model. To conclude, in the context of the comparative analysis, the paper provides some insights for increasing the long-term success of community-based management marine conservation programs in the region, particularly Melanesia.

2. Conceptual framework

Conservation practitioners working in Oceania generally understand the complexity and context specific nature of project implementation in the region (e.g., [25]). However, understanding the socio-cultural and historical complexities of a region is not sufficient, particularly in Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, which have amongst the most

intricate land and sea tenure and kinship systems in the world. This paper conceptualizes the design and implementation of conservation within complex and site specific nested and polycentric systems of marine governance and kinship. Research on the governance of common pool resources (such as those in coastal areas in Oceania) has highlighted the nested nature of governance systems [47]. The design principles of local governance systems, including the demarcation of boundaries, prevention of interloping by outsiders, the capacity to monitor fishing activities, and the existence of conflict-resolution mechanisms (if present) [12,47] are often nested across various socio-cultural and political institutional levels (that may or may not be linked) and that stretch locally, regionally, nationally, and globally [42].

Yet this nested complexity also exists *locally* in any “community” where multilevel governance nodes are nested within the indigenous social-economy and governance systems. Thus many of these systems are *polycentric*, or situations in which there are multiple nodes of power and decision-making, which are often independent from each other [46,47] and which stretch across various localized indigenous institutions [29]. Because local marine governance in Solomon Islands and Vanuatu are embedded in decentralized nested and polycentric governance systems, working with an essentialized conception of the “community” as the local unit of analysis is problematic in this context. The design and implementation of marine conservation or fisheries management programs, therefore, requires the analysis of each nested layer of local governance as well as the ability to locate and understand the interdependence (or not) between vectors of local power within a target area and associated villages. This is crucial before attempting to scale-up conservation efforts regionally or nationally.

This highlights the challenge associated with the question of where the “local” or “community” actually sits within community-based resource management approaches in the Pacific context and elsewhere (e.g., [1]). The nested and often polycentric nature of governance systems in Melanesia not only represents the intricacies of socio-cultural systems in the region, but also local attempts to contest the uncritical reification of the village-as-community [40] by foreign observers and scholars. In particular, these alternative approaches draw attention to how local people and practitioners have addressed the challenge of community in the Pacific. Anthropologists and historians have noted (but rarely conservation practitioners), that the coastal village-as-community in much of the Pacific is a recent phenomenon; a historical conjunction of local, missionary, and colonial agencies (e.g., [57]). These villages often have people of diverse tribal groups living together yet maintaining parallel and/or hybrid identities and possessing differential political and territorial claims. This translates into a difficult context for identifying marine tenure and governance systems in the region.

For instance, if a researcher or resource manager went to any coastal village in Solomon Islands or Vanuatu, and unexpectedly asked anyone about “customary management” or “sea/marine tenure” and whether or not “others” could fish there, the response will likely be bafflement followed by the answer that “anyone can fish here.” This response while perfectly coherent within the indigenous social and political economy—as “anyone” refers to people belonging to regional kin networks who are interlinked through history and culture, and who possess nested tenurial rights and attendant access rights—can mislead an outsider. Upon deeper investigation, however, one would discover the difference between “perceptual” and “operational” execution of tenurial rights [4]. Within any one area local communities, or members thereof, who may have asymmetric rights over one or more marine territories, can choose to enforce, or not, access and/or use limitations (to their members and outsiders). This capacity depends on: (1) the social, economic, and political costs and benefits of defending a territory, (2) their capacity to have their territorial rights recognized by inclusive or neighboring groups (who may also be claimants), and (3) their actual ability to enforce their claims (e.g., villagers may not be

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