

Kiribati: towards major development in small-scale tuna fisheries?

Kiribati is one of the Pacific's most disadvantaged countries in terms of poverty, available resources and climate change impact. Fishing, particularly for tuna, is the main development opportunity for the country, which has a population of 100,000 and one of the largest exclusive economic zones (EEZ) in the region, spanning 3.4 million km².

In Kiribati's remoter islands, fishing is practised for subsistence and, on the main atoll of Tarawa, small-scale fisheries provide food security and a livelihood for a large part of the population. Tarawa's small-scale fishers mainly target skipjack, which the men catch by trolling from small four- to six-metre vessels while the women sell the catch along the atoll's main road. The tuna-rich waters of Kiribati's EEZ attract foreign fishing fleets that purchase licences for catching tuna, mostly using purse seiners and longliners. Fishing licence fees are the government's main source of revenue, accounting for 60% of its income.

In October 2012, a vertically integrated company handling catch, processing and exports set up a processing plant built to European standards in Betio, West Tarawa for a cost of USD 9 million (Fig. 1). This company, Kiribati Fish Limited (KFL), is a partnership between the Kiribati Government, Fiji's Golden Ocean and Shanghai Deep Sea Fisheries, a large Chinese fishing company. KFL owns four tuna longliners and exports its products to the United States, Australia, Asia and soon to Europe. It currently employs about 100 local workers, mainly women, at its Betio plant and a dozen fishers on its vessels. Its processing potential is

15 tonnes a day, but it currently exports less than 5. If it achieved its potential output, it could create 100 more jobs on land, and catching the extra 10 tonnes of tuna a day would involve 300 to 500 local fishers, who could sell directly to KFL.

Mindful of the major social and economic role played by KFL in Kiribati and the opportunities it offers for developing and improving small-scale fishers' livelihoods, SPC, backed by international donors including the New Zealand Aid Programme, has committed to actively work with the Kiribati fisheries sector as a whole, i.e. the Fisheries Department, the private sector and community fishers, to make the most of this unique development opportunity.

With New Zealand assistance, 10 fish aggregating devices (FADs) were purchased in late 2013 and will be moored in the waters around Tarawa Atoll in February 2014. In 2012, SPC also assisted the Kiribati Fisheries Training Centre implement a sea safety and fishing course geared towards the needs of small-scale fishers. In November 2013, five training workshops were held on good hygiene practices and onboard handling of sashimi-quality tuna, with 88 fishers trained.



Figure 1. Preparing sashimi blocks for Japan. KFL currently employs a hundred people, mainly women, at its processing plant (image Michel Blanc).



Figure 2. (A) A five-metre vessel used for skipjack trolling off Tarawa and (B) one of KFL's four tuna longliners (images: Michel Blanc).

A new longliner prototype adapted to the needs of Kiribati fishers?

The main obstacle to involving local fishers in KFL's operations is that their vessels are unsuited to fishing around FADs, as they are too small for two- or three-day campaigns and refrigerating large catches (Fig. 2A). The fishers require larger vessels at affordable prices, unlike the modern tuna longliners used, for example, by KFL (Fig. 2B). As the economic situation is promising with the possibility that New Zealand guarantees loans taken out by local fishers at the Tarawa ANZ bank, a prototype vessel urgently needs to be tested to assess whether it is economically viable before encouraging Tarawa fishermen to purchase it.

Despite this obstacle, KFL is likely to operate in Kiribati for some time to come and provides a unique opportunity for the Kiribati small-scale fisheries sector. SPC is mindful of this and intends to provide considerable assistance to the sector in 2014 in close collaboration with KFL and the Kiribati Fisheries Department. Technical assistance and training (in setting up and launching FADs and fishing around FADs) will be provided to follow on from the training already provided in 2013, which included the hygiene and onboard tuna handling workshops in November and practical training for two Kiribati Fisheries Training Centre (KFTC) instructors in Vanuatu. In addition to such assistance, which is already covered by the Fisheries Development Section's work programme, SPC is actively seeking extra funding, which, once it has been identified, will help fund a new fishing vessel prototype developed by KiriCraft Central Pacific (KCP) that will be suited to both sashimi-grade tuna fishing and local fishers' limited budgets. The KIR-25 is an 11-metre longliner costing around USD 54,000

(excluding the engine and fishing gear). The vessel plans¹ are currently being finalised by Oyvind Guldbrandsen, a naval architect well known in the Pacific, and KCP, a shipyard that is managed by the equally renowned Mike Savins and has been operating in Kiribati for 20 years, proof that it is very well versed in the local social and economic context and issues. KFL has also committed to financially support the project by providing the vessels' engines, fishing gear and safety equipment.

SPC will coordinate the project and provide technical assistance for the initial fishing operations and for training the first local crew. The vessel will then be handed over to KFL, which will operate it under an agreement with SPC on the understanding that the boat's objective will be to train local crews to operate it for the purposes of commercial fishing around FADs. The crews will receive the profits from fish sales to KFL, but will have to cover day-to-day vessel operating costs such as ice, bait and fuel. Data on catches and the vessel's accounts will be managed by KFL, who will forward the information on to SPC. After the vessel has been operating for a year, SPC will assess the data collected by KFL and publish its findings on the KIR-25 prototype's economic performance.

SPC will then disseminate the information to Kiribati and other countries in the region, as KIR-25 has a number of features which, in theory, make it a highly suitable vessel for the needs of fishermen in many other Pacific Islands.

For more information:

Michel Blanc

Nearshore Fisheries Development Adviser, SPC

michelbl@spc.int

¹ See article by Mike Savins on page 27 of this issue of SPC *Fisheries Newsletter*.