

# ‘Twisting and spinning’ theatre into coastal fisheries management: Informing and engaging communities to address challenges

Pita Neihapi,<sup>1</sup> Ada Sokach, Douglas Koran, Jodi Devine, Joanne Dorras, Neil Andrew and Dirk J. Steenbergen

## Introduction

*Given the importance of fish in the lives of Melanesians, and the increasing pressures on marine resource stocks and habitats (Hickey 2008), managing coastal fisheries has been identified as one of the Pacific Islands region’s biggest development challenges (SPC 2015). And as with other Pacific Island countries, coastal fisheries in Vanuatu are primary source of food and income, and a cornerstone of local cultural identity (VFD 2019). At the same time, many coastal fisheries are experiencing declines in production due to increased fishing pressure resulting from population growth, market expansion and impacts of climate change (Léopold et al. 2013). Much of the current work around community-based fisheries management in Vanuatu is focused on determining how grassroots management initiatives can scale-up to reach more people more effectively (Tavue et al. 2016; Raubani et al. 2017). Essential to that goal, is effective communication and information exchange between communities and development partners to share understandings about fisheries management, and highlight the many layers of support needed to create and access opportunities, including from governments.*

## Keywords

community-based fisheries management, participation, social change, theatre for development, Vanuatu

## Raising awareness

Conventional awareness-raising meetings in communities often involve extension officers informing people of national fisheries laws, ecological processes and technical management options. Brochures or posters are often distributed among households or posted on communal notice boards for people to read in their own time. All instances, however, reflect a one-way information stream.

The challenges involved in reaching remote locations means that these meetings often do not happen, and when they do, facilitators must deal with:

1. conflicting daily schedules of people that limit their availability for such meetings;
2. reluctance among participants about speaking out publicly and/or challenging convention;
3. underrepresentation of marginalised social groups; and
4. community fatigue by participating in monotonous meetings.

This burden is often borne disproportionately by women. As a consequence, at no fault of their own, facilitators struggle to catalyse a lasting impact.

In Vanuatu, the spoken word – through music, storytelling and theatre – has been central to the culture for generations. Such public modes of communication continue to

form important platforms to address social, often sensitive, issues and taboos. Theatre and drama have proven far more effective in conveying messages, and educating and spreading awareness in society, particularly given Vanuatu’s low literacy rates (Sloman 2011). With funding support from SwedBio, a Swedish conservation and development fund, a partnership developed between the theatre group Wan Smolbag (WSB; <https://www.wansmolbag.org>) and the Vanuatu Fisheries Department (VFD) in 2018, to create and tour a theatre production, in combination with an interactive workshop, that would communicate the importance of fish and sustainable management of coastal fisheries to rural people in Vanuatu.

WSB has achieved significant success in highlighting social development issues through television, community-based theatre and local movie productions (Taylor and Gaskell 2007; Drysdale 2014; Woodward-Hanna 2014). The power of humour and metaphor to communicate, without overtly challenging intrinsic community power relations, is a universal tool. WSB uses these tools to convey important messages in their community theatre productions, and challenges audiences with the unvarnished truth. As a grassroots non-governmental organisation based out of Port Vila, staff and volunteers have worked for three decades in developing awareness of challenging issues, promoting community action, and providing training and materials to schools, communities, and government departments. Bringing this capacity into the realm of coastal fisheries management offers an opportunity to mobilise civil society groups to take more active roles in managing their marine resources.

<sup>1</sup> The Pacific Community (SPC); seconded to Vanuatu Fisheries Department (VFD), Port Vila, Vanuatu. Email: [pitan@spc.int](mailto:pitan@spc.int)

JOHN BOITA DONALD FRANK HELEN KAILO KALKOT KALTAPAU MICHAEL MAKI REXNETH MARANDA PATRICK ATEL



A WAN SMOLBAG THEATRE PRODUCTION

# TWIST MO SPIN

2019 & 2020 COMMUNITY TOUR

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH VANUATU FISHERIES DEPARTMENT'S PATHWAYS PROJECT

'TELLING A STORY ABOUT LIFE ALONG THE VANUATU COAST AND THE IMPORTANCE OF FISH TO PEOPLE .... AND PEOPLE TO FISH'



RITCHIE BENJAMIN EVELYN SARA VIRANA TAMATA MORINDA TARI LILIAN TASSO PETER BELL

PRODUCTION JOANNE DORRAS, JODI DEVINE, PETER WALKER TECHNICAL ADVICE PITA NEIHAPI, ADA SOKACH, DOUGLAS KORAN, DIRK STEENBERGEN

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'Twist Mo Spin' touring production poster. (images: Paul Jones, design: Kristel Steenbergen)





Actors from the 'Twist Mo Spin' production during a community performance - ©Paul Jones

The collaborative project seeks to convey critical messages around fish-based nutrition, livelihoods, and inclusive decision-making. Where WSB provides creative and theatre-technical capacity for the play, staff from VFD, under their Australian government-funded 'Pathways Project', provide technical guidance on coastal fisheries management. As such, the play 'Twist Mo Spin' (a reference to the twisting and spinning of dolphins) was created in early 2019, and the cast of 13 actors has since completed its first tour of communities in the southernmost province of Tafea.

The story of 'Twist Mo Spin' follows a young couple, Lyn and Jason, who return to Jason's village to build a life together. As Jason falls comfortably back into his familiar environment, Lyn has to fit in with the new community and family life in which she finds herself. Expectations are placed on Lyn, for example, to bare a son, and to assume particular gender-defined responsibilities and roles in family life. At the same time, the community is dealing with declines in fisheries from catching too many fish, climate change and population growth.

The story builds to a point where Jason's father passes, and Jason must assume an important role in the family. Meanwhile, the community as a whole reaches a point of internal turmoil about the state of resources and who is to blame for that. The play ends with community members in a heated debate during a community fisheries meeting, at which point an open-ended question is posed about what they want for the future and what they need to do about it. In essence, WSB brings the audience to the take-off point for collective action; namely the realisation that by working together they can have

better outcomes for themselves and their community. To help resolve this challenge, the audience is then led into an interactive community workshop for people to start thinking more deeply about some of the drivers of degradation and ways to work together to better manage their resources.

Given that much of the challenges facing coastal fisheries have to do with people, the play's storyline focuses on important social, economic and political aspects of life in remote coastal communities, rather than rushing straight to technical fisheries management. Some key themes of the play include:

- social stereotyping – for example, entrenched gender roles affect who has access to fisheries and the kind of benefits derived from them;
- life and conditions in remote coastal communities – family life and social relations within a community form a fundamental pillar in people's lives'
- importance of fish – people depend on fish in their day-to-day lives for food (nutrition) and income (livelihoods), and how the unpredictable nature of markets can change people's perception of the value and use of fish (for commercial vs subsistence needs);
- challenges of collective action – people are faced with managing private (family) interests and communal problems, where, for example, contesting claims in a community over the cause of reef damage requires open discussion and decision-making.

As gripping as 'Twist Mo Spin' is, it is not simply an entertaining distraction – this is theatre for social change (Sloman



Audiences at different 'Twist Mo Spin' community productions held on Tanna Island - ©Paul Jones



2011). The play illuminates issues and makes people think in ways that no focus group discussion could. The audience is confronted with issues that are often left unspoken; in a public space, they each reflect on a shared reality. Spring-boarding off this personal reflection, the cast guides the adult audience in the interactive workshops through five different activities. Activities involve diverse formats, ranging from smaller disaggregated group discussion to plenary debates. The activities are energetic and challenge people to reflect on what they saw in the play (i.e. what they learned, and what is similar and/or different to their context), to think about leadership and fisheries rules in the community, and to debate feasible futures (i.e. what is being done already, and what should be done and how).

The workshops have become a critical part of the awareness-raising campaign as the partnership seeks to not only further the messages of the play, but more importantly have people take ownership of ideas relevant to their particular contexts. Based on the play, and on community responses, the

project is also developing creative new multi-media materials such as comic books and DVDs that will help keep the messages in 'Twist Mo Spin' alive in local conversation beyond the project's lifetime.

The experience from the first tour has demonstrated the power of theatre in bringing sensitive taboos to the forefront of discussion without undermining anyone. This is a key aspect of effective communication with local groups, and a fundamental first step towards conversing and co-learning with people is to break down barriers for participation that come with formal meeting settings. The 'Twist Mo Spin' play and workshop once again shows how alternative formats, materials and approaches deserve more widespread application across sectors that seek to engage a broad range of local people and give them a more inclusive voice in addressing the rural development and natural resource management challenges communities face.

With the conclusion of the first community tour in Vanuatu's southernmost province of Tafea, the cast and crew will gear up for a second tour to the northern provinces of Sanma, Malampa and Penama in early 2020. For more information on the partnership and the 'Twist Mo Spin' initiative please contact:

Wan Smolbag:  
Wan Smolbag Haos, Route Mele, Tagabe,  
tel: +678 27119

Vanuatu Fisheries Department  
(att: Pathways CBFM project):  
Yumi Go Haus, Independence Park, PMB 9045,  
tel: +678 23119

Post play interactive workshop activities with community audiences - ©Paul Jones



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