

# **Community Engagement as a Tool to Support Conservation Outcomes in Milne Bay, Papua New Guinea**

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## **Abstract**

This paper describes the community engagement process (CEP) that supports the introduction of community-based management systems for marine resources in Milne Bay Province of Papua New Guinea. The engagement process is a fundamental component of the UNDP-funded Milne Bay Community-based Coastal and Marine Conservation Project, which is executed by Conservation International. The project's objective is to set up community-managed marine protected areas in collaboration with local communities to conserve a representative sample of marine ecosystems found in the project area. The community engagement process begins by building trust between community and the project, focussing on the welfare of people and communities rather than directly on conservation in the first instance. There is a strong emphasis on capacity building and the sharing of information to enable full participation of communities in determining the best use and management of their natural resources.

Specially trained local community members called Village Engagement Trainers (VETs) drive the engagement process in close cooperation with local government, through Ward Development Committees. Participatory tools such as Participatory Rural Appraisals, Community Mapping and household surveys are used to obtain social, environmental and economic information for each community involved in the project.

Initially, VETs work to help communities understand how their livelihoods depend on the sustainable management of their natural resources. Having identified key stakeholders, they work closely with them to identify issues and discuss viable management options. Once communities express a direct interest in setting up protected areas, VETs then support project staff to survey the areas as well as to plan and implement resource management systems for each community. The VETs also support the introduction of alternative livelihood strategies tailored to each community's needs. These could include any or all of a number of options such as small-scale tourism, better ways to fish or manage gardens, aquaculture, value-adding and support for small-scale businesses through training and micro-credit schemes. It is intended that resulting benefits will offset some or all of the losses incurred by limiting the use of the marine resource in certain areas, thereby ensuring long-term support by communities for the locally managed marine areas.

This paper will detail the community engagement methodology trialled by the project to date, as well as discuss successes and lessons learned from the process.

## **Keywords**

Engagement, participation, conservation, sustainability, partnership

## **1. Introduction**

Increasingly, conservation projects understand that community involvement and support is essential to achieving long-term resource sustainability and good conservation outcomes when establishing locally managed marine or terrestrial protected areas. Organisations engage communities for many different reasons, but how they go about this is what makes the difference.

In this paper I will discuss:

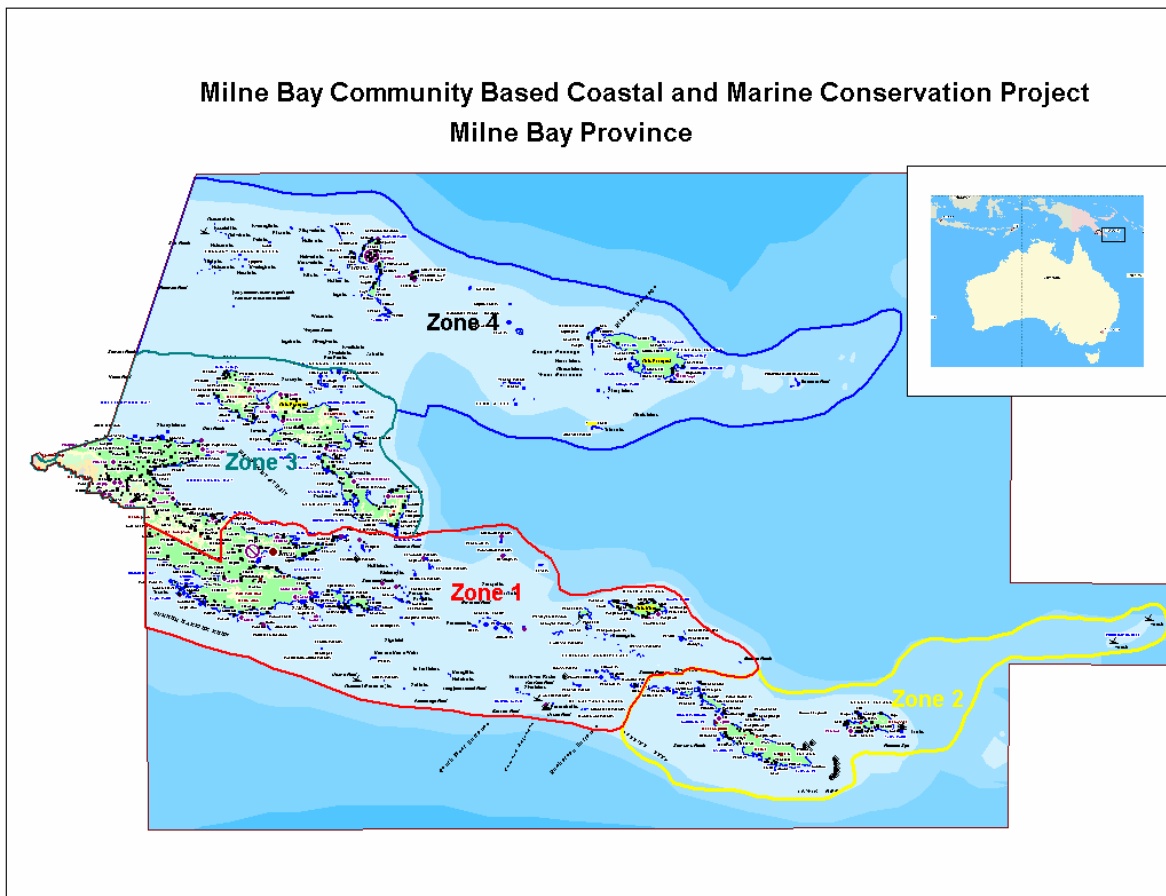
1. the Community Engagement Process that the Milne Bay Community-based Coastal and Marine Conservation Project (CBC&MCP) has adopted to help communities decide how they wish to become involved in the management and use of their terrestrial and marine resources
2. two case studies that demonstrate the success and limitations of the community engagement process used by the project to date.

## **2. Background**

Milne Bay Province is located in Papua New Guinea on the most eastern end of mainland New Guinea (Figure 1). The province has a land area of some 14,100 square kilometres, with a population of 205,000 people, which is 4.6 per cent of Papua New Guinea's population (2000 national census). The project area covers an area of 46,000 square kilometres, most of which is sea, and has a population of approximately 65,000 people. It is predominantly a maritime province with a diversity of marine habitats such as ten larger islands, more than 150 named small islands, extensive coral reefs, sea grass beds and mangrove forests. In close proximity to the coral triangle, it is unsurprising that some of the world's richest marine biodiversity sites are found in Milne Bay.

The Milne Bay Community-based Coastal and Marine Conservation Project (CBC&MCP) is a community-based marine biodiversity conservation effort funded jointly by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), Global Environment Facility (GEF), Conservation International, Japanese Human Development Trust Fund and other partners including the National Government of Papua New Guinea and the Milne Bay Provincial Government.

The aim of the project is to create a system of community managed marine protected areas to protect important marine ecosystems, preserve biodiversity and protect commercially valuable species. As well as establishing a system of MPAs, the project will implement strategies to directly benefit communities through the introduction of improved livelihood systems that will ensure the sustainable use of their marine and land resources. During the second five year-phase of the project, the methodologies trialled in the first five years will be implemented in other areas of the province, including community engagement as a component of the project.



**Figure 1. Map of Milne Bay Province, showing Zones 1, 2, 3 and 4, which are the zones for carrying out the Milne Bay Community-based Coastal and Marine Conservation Project’s activities, in order of implementation**

### **3. The community engagement program**

The CBC&MCP’s community engagement program was started to facilitate information exchange between local communities and project staff and to provide the basis of involving local communities in the management of their natural resources. This program is based on the understanding that only when the resource owners are involved will the project have any meaning to them, which will enable them to play an active role in the management of their resources. In particular, the project recognises that people have practical and spiritual connections with the resources found within their environment. The CEP was developed to include all resource owners and resource users, recognising that customary land and marine tenure is different in all sites. The desired outcome of the CEP is the establishment of a collaborative partnership that stresses mutual obligation and commitment.

### **3.1 Village engagement trainers (VETs)**

Village engagement trainers (VETs) are a very important component of the project, as they drive the community engagement process and determine the progress made in each community. The foundation they lay in the community will affect all other activities that follow.

The project has 18 Community Trainers and includes males and females. All trainers are carefully selected from target communities in such a way where they are from the area of interest but are not a member of the target community so to avoid conflicts of interest. These 18 trainers form three groups of six members. The teams visit communities during field patrols three times a year, visiting seven or eight communities on each patrol. The three groups were allocated areas of responsibility based on local government administrative boundaries, the language(s) spoken by each community and for geographical and logistical reasons. Trainers speak the local language and live in the community when they patrol.

VETs are paid only when they are on patrol or when conducting specific activities for the CBC&MCP such as attending trainings or assisting with fieldwork. The rest of the time, they are encouraged to engage in activities that support their own livelihoods in the long term. All VETs live in their respective villages and are called in on a needs basis.

### **3.2 Philosophy of CEP**

The approach to community engagement that has been adopted by the project ensures that the process must:

- be participatory and inclusive
- allow for recognition of customary tenure and rights
- result in negotiated agreements
- involve collaborative partnerships that stress mutual obligation and commitment.

There are several basic working principles that the project shares as a group, which I believe have helped us progress and achieve as much as we have. These principles are very simple but they do work.

#### *Having an open mind*

It is important to understand that the work we are doing is nothing new and has been done for many years by organisations all over the world. We need to have an open mind to allow for new ideas and new ways of doing things to be incorporated into our work and to realise that there are often many ways of achieving our outcomes.

#### *Being prepared*

The project places a high emphasis on preparations before undertaking a visit to the community. We not only prepare rations and fuel but also the information that we are to share with communities. Each

trainer is also required to show the rest of their team the role that they intend to fulfil during the visit through role-play, sometimes doing so more than once to ensure that each team member is absolutely sure of their specific roles before the team leaves.

#### *Adapt to changing circumstances*

We must be willing to change in response to what we have tried that has worked and what has not, as well as learning from lessons from other organisations. These discussions are ongoing within the team and we make the adjustments in such a way that it works for our group and the communities and localities that we are working in. We at CBC&MCP also realise that when work begins in other parts of the province we will have to make adjustments to suit each situation.

#### *Learning from our work*

A debriefing session is held after each field visit between project staff and the VETs. This is when project staff learn about what took place during the field visit and how the VETs have handled each issue. Everyone agrees on how similar situations can be dealt with in future and what the best action should be. Project staff use this opportunity to learn more about the issues impacting on communities in the project area and are given feedback on tasks that were assigned to VETs for their field visit. Evaluations from the field visit, including community feedback, are also used to improve on future field visits and the design of training materials both for VETs and the communities.

#### *Try to identify current best practice.*

The project was very fortunate in that both the trainer and some of the VETs were able to visit and learn about how other groups such as the Bismarck Ramu Group (BRG)<sup>1</sup> conduct Community Entry work in Papua New Guinea. The experience from BRG and the Lak ICDP projects provided excellent guidance in devising a system that works with communities we are concerned about managing their natural resources. Project staff are mindful that a form of community engagement that works in one community may not work in another. So there is always the task of finding the approach that is appropriate for each community drawing on the experiences of other projects and groups in Papua New Guinea and other countries.

### **3.3 The community engagement process**

The community engagement process for the Milne Bay CBC&MCP started in early 2002. The VETs made their first visits to communities in mid 2002, after undergoing training in effective communication, information gathering, and skills enabling them to facilitate community conscientisation and awareness

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<sup>1</sup> The Bismarck Ramu Group (BRG) is a Local Environment Awareness organisation that works to assist communities on issues of land rights, literacy, conservation and culture. BRG started as an Integrated Conservation and Development (ICDP) project operated by the Department of Environment & Conservation but now operates as an NGO. BRG has assisted communities in managing their natural resources through the establishment of Wildlife Management Areas in Papua New Guinea and has achieved exceptional on-ground support from communities. The CBC&MCP's community engagement program was largely based on their approach, as the BRG has been highly successful in mobilising communities at the grassroots level. Most importantly, their work has not only been effective, but also sustainable in the long term.

raising. During the first two years, the main emphasis has been on getting to know the communities, as well as gathering information on culture, land and marine tenure systems and identifying the main issues affecting each specific community. VETs have also spent time explaining the role of the CBC&MCP. In particular, they concentrated on defusing any suspicions about the CBC&MCP, managing false expectations and explaining that the project did not intend to take over land or resources.

The process of establishing community managed MPAs within the province takes time and includes many steps which the community must progress through. Following is a brief summary of each step in the MPA establishment process that has been developed by project staff in collaboration with the VETs.

***Step 1: Making contact and establishing trust***

This step is based on the knowledge that every community has one or more leaders. It may be an elected member, a clan leader, a church leader or an elder, but they all play leadership roles in their community. This step allows the VETs to identify that person or persons, get to know them and have some understanding of the power structures within the community. In this step we also try to identify the groups of people in the community with special needs.

The tools that are used to gather information for this step include transect walks, story telling and semi-structured interviews. Storytelling is particularly important, as VETs spend time in different households across the village and try to get to know the community's concerns and become involved in community activities. Semi-structured interviews are carried out in some instances on the judgment of the VETs. A good observation skill in the trainers is very important for this process.

***Step 2: Awareness and information sharing***

Information sharing starts at first contact, when VETs introduce themselves and explain the reason for their visit to the community. In step two, information has been prepared for them by other members of the project team for discussion in the community. In particular VETs talk about the project, explaining which organisations are involved and why, who provides the funding and how staff can work to help the community manage their natural resources. Information on the current state of the province's marine resources is also provided to each community. This information is based on a number of rapid resource and stock assessments that have been undertaken by different organisations over time. Information in the local language is left with the community for them to read, share and discuss. Posters depicting situations from other areas are used to help communities to understand their situation, their own rights to use of their resources and their responsibilities towards maintaining their resources for future generations.

Information sharing is a very important part of the process, as it helps communities to make informed decisions when the time comes to decide what actions should be taken to ensure that their natural

resources are managed in a sustainable manner. The aim is not only to build community capacity, but also to instil trust in the community. This is a slow process and must be done at the community's own pace, which is something that the VETs have to be conscious of.

### ***Step 3: Identifying issues***

This step involves helping communities identify the problems affecting them, by giving them the opportunity to take the lead role in telling us what it is we should do to help them. This helped avoid the situation where we as outsiders set the standards for their village life, as communities could make their own decisions based on the available information. For example, we might assume that depletion of their marine resources is an important issue for them, whereas a completely different issue such as the lack of a reliable water supply may be their main issue.

This process is facilitated by the use of community mapping, which is very similar to resource mapping. Communities are asked to draw their village on the ground or in the sand as in most cases VETs did not have blackboards or whiteboards. The community members point out the good points and the bad points about the village. Marine boundaries are also included. Everyone is then asked to think about how they can make their community a better place. These ideas are shared, resulting in a list of issues on how participants would like to improve their community. In most communities, this was completed during the course of the first visit, although some needed longer as it is a very important part of the process. VETs therefore allowed time for everyone to digest the information and discuss it amongst themselves again before moving them onto the next step.

### ***Step 4: Analysis of the issues and priorities***

Communities are now asked to look critically at each and every issue that they have raised. This is done only after the communities are comfortable that they are ready to move on. This is a long process and can be quite difficult for communities, especially if outsiders try to influence the process. It can take up to three visits for some communities. Two important lessons have been learned here. Firstly, the issues have to be understood properly by the community and secondly the facilitator has to have a good understanding of the process.

Problem Tree analysis was used for this process. VETs start with the identified issue, which becomes the core problem, and then go on to talk about the effects, the underlying causes and potential solutions to the problem. Following this, the community is asked to identify what actions should be taken to achieve the desired solution.

This is one of the most difficult parts of the process for communities and VETs had to redo the exercise at least twice in most communities before they were ready to move forward. It is also of vital importance that their community leaders are present for this exercise, as the identified actions will later form part of the Ward's development plan. Once everyone felt comfortable with all outcomes of this step, VETs move them forward to the next exercise, which is prioritising. Importantly, we prefer to

complete the analysis of all the identified issues before moving on to discussing what their priorities should be in terms of addressing the issues.

The Participatory Rural Appraisal tool used for this part of the exercise is simple preference scoring. The problem that the community gave the highest score to was the issue to be addressed first. It is only at this stage that the project finds out what priority the communities give to the management of their marine resources. If these rank highly, the project then starts the process towards the establishment of appropriate management systems leading to the creation of MPAs.

### ***Step 5: Identifying the options***

This step seeks to identify the best ways to address the problems identified in the previous exercise. To do this, project staff and selected community members conduct in-depth surveys of the underlying socio-economic and environmental conditions of the community and use the data collected to come up with the most efficient, feasible and effective ways to address the identified issues. These are then compiled in an 'options paper', which is presented to the community for discussion.

Communities then make plans on the actions they will take to address the issues, on the basis of the options that have been identified and presented to them. These action plans need to specify what can be done and who is responsible for which particular activity, as well as put timelines to each activity. Communities are encouraged to make these plans themselves as part of the capacity building process.

This step also involves obtaining funding and/or the resources required to undertake the necessary actions. Communities are shown how to identify the different resources available locally and externally to enable them to address the problem. They may have to approach several organisations before they can secure the assistance needed, so this can take a fair amount of time. The important lesson, though, is that communities need to know how to address their own problems. In other words, we help communities to exercise their rights over their resources and the responsibility for the outcomes of their decisions.

This step can take several months but depends mainly on the size and magnitude of the reef area, as well as on the population size and the number of resource owners. For communities that choose marine issues, this is where the process towards creating marine protected areas start.

### ***Step 6: Negotiations and agreement***

Communities must enter into agreements or some form of understanding locally or externally with other appropriate people or organisations to help address the issues. This is so both parties are aware of what is expected of them in the process and formalises the commitment of both parties to be involved in the development and execution of agreed activities and tasks. The agreement(s) may be for funding or for technical support or indeed for any other form of assistance and must also specify

what the community itself will deliver. The project supports these negotiations in close cooperation with the VETs.

By this time, community leaders should be in a position to do most of the facilitation work. This is where project staff step back and play a mainly supportive and encouraging role. It is important to allow the community to deal with this at their own pace so that they can take on full ownership of the work, thereby ensuring long-term acceptance and sustainability.

### ***Step 7: Action***

Action is the actual implementation of the action plans after resources have been identified and agreements have been put into place for implementation of community decisions to occur. The communities themselves implement all planned activities, including gathering basic information necessary for monitoring and evaluation of their work. Again in this step, the project does not play the major role, although we may be required to provide information.

## **4. Case studies**

I will now go on to discuss two case studies that illustrate our successes and some of the most important lessons learnt since 2002 in the community engagement process. The first case study, Netuli Island, was a community that had not received visits from VETs prior to them becoming involved in the project. The second, Nuakata Island, had been visited continuously since 2002 by VET patrols. This has allowed for direct comparisons that have helped shed light on what aspects of the VET process have been most effective and what has not worked as well.

### **4.1 Netuli Island**

Netuli Island is located on the north coast of the mainland in the Maramatana local level government (LLG) area. Our work on Netuli Island came about in response to a request from the resource owners to help them stop and hopefully reverse the damage that was being done to the island and its reefs through unsustainable harvesting of its natural resources. In 1997, the provincial government built a road to connect the North Coast to the provincial capital, Alotau. This road serves a wide community in ten LLGs, who now can travel to Alotau in a much shorter time and thereby easily access markets. The road has also resulted in some negative impacts, such as increased harvest rates of the natural resources from Netuli Island and its reefs. Shellfish (oysters and clams), flying foxes, green leafy vegetables and many marine animals were harvested heavily, as they brought good prices on the Alotau market and in roadside markets. By the year 2000, the island's resources were already showing signs of heavy depletion and the resource owners were in real need of help.

Netuli resource owners initially requested help from the project in 2000, but it was only in 2003 that the project was able to respond. This was as a result of limitations in terms of staff and financial resources. CBC&MCP staff conducted an awareness workshop to which all users and owners of land on Netuli were invited. Leaders including the council president, councillors and district administrative

staff were present and all pledged their support to engage the project to work with the six local clans to develop a management plan for the Island. In particular, they identified that the island was losing its cultural, natural and aesthetic values and they wanted some action to control and reverse this decline. The community then confirmed this request in writing, and in September 2004 project staff undertook a three-week survey to assess the environmental, social and economic situation of the area thereby allowing us to devise natural resource management and community development options.

#### **4.2 Nuakata Island**

The second case study is Nuakata Island, also in the Maramatana LLG. This community had been selected as a target community from the beginning of the project due to its close proximity to Alotau, and because it had the highest number of recorded fish species in the province as well as an extensive reef system that is easily delineated and regularly frequented by dive operators. Awareness and community empowerment exercises have been conducted on the Island since 2002. Nuakata is also the first community to go through the community engagement process and has identified their priorities for action. In addition to that, the establishment of a Live Reef Fish Food trade in the waters around Nuakata made action a priority and highlighted the need for local communities to have access to information on all aspects of managing their marine resources. I will explain the situation surrounding the Live Reef Fish Food trade in more detail, as this was an interesting challenge for the project.

A Live Reef Fish Food company was granted a license to fish in Milne Bay waters by the National Fisheries Authority of PNG. This allowed the company to start harvesting marine resources in another Local Level Government (LLG) area of the province on a trial basis before expanding to other LLG areas. The company started work in the Goodenough LLG but soon left this area due to very high demands for compensation by the community. On leaving the Goodenough LLG, the company decided to move their operations to the waters surrounding Nuakata Island. Neither the provincial government nor project staff knew about the change in location until the company executive showed up at Nuakata Island to sign an agreement with the community.

Initially, the community of Nuakata were wary about signing the agreement with the company, based on some of the information that had been provided to them previously by the VETs about uncontrolled harvesting of marine resources and the use of destructive fishing practices. The community wanted to learn about the industry first before they committed to allowing the company to fish in their waters. The project was able to provide this information and also gave them the opportunity to talk to communities where the company had previously worked. In the end, the majority of the community agreed not to become involved with the live reef fish food company and lobbied the government to listen to them, which resulted in the government eventually directing the company to move back to the Goodenough LLG.

While some information was reaching its intended audience on the island it has also been clear that in some instances the information does not filter down from the community leaders to other members of the community. This became evident when project staff arrived on Nuakata Island to start the detailed survey work. We were confronted on the very first day at a community meeting and told to leave the island, because the community leaders had not clearly explained what the survey would entail. With support from the VETs and project staff the community leaders were able to convince the rest of the community to allow us to work with them while using the opportunity to learn more about the project and what we intend to do. Although we were responding to the community's request to help them, there were community members that still did not fully understand the project and how it would be able to work with them. The survey was the perfect opportunity for the community to learn more about the project, as local people were hired to help implement survey work and were involved in awareness sessions and interaction with project staff during the eight-week survey.

### 4.3 Community concerns

Lessons from working with the Netuli and Nuakata communities can be summarised as follows:

- Both communities were suspicious about the project and its intentions. Some believed that it was sent by the government to study the land and eventually purchase it from the resource owners or that it was behind the Land Mobilization Bill<sup>2</sup> that the government had had to abandon after nationwide community uprisings. Others thought that the project was conducting the survey to form a *One-World Government*.<sup>3</sup> The way the two communities dealt with the suspicions were different. In Netuli, one community refused outright to work with us as a result, while in Nuakata community members requested more information and the chance to discuss the issues in a community forum, which allowed us to continue work.
- The idea that an outsider would show up and offer to assist the community to take care of their natural resources without payment was a completely foreign concept in both communities. This is because, in the past, outsiders had often tricked island communities into selling off their land and their resources, as they did not understand the value of their resources. Only later did they find out why these outsiders wanted the resources and the suspicion is still in the minds of many people.
- The main livelihood issues affecting both communities were very similar, with people wanting a secure source of income, which is being threatened by destructive fishing methods and unsustainable harvesting practices.
- Both communities agreed very strongly that their marine resources are culturally very important, 95 per cent and 83 per cent for Nuakata and Netuli communities respectively. However, Netuli respondents said only 23 per cent depended on marine resources all the time for food and/or income, while in Nuakata 48 per cent said that this was the case.

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<sup>2</sup> The Land Mobilization Bill was a big issue in 2001 when three students and another citizen were killed rioting for the government to drop the Bill. They were successful and that has now been shelved.

<sup>3</sup> *One world Government* is refers to what we read about in Revelations chapter 13,14 &15 of the Bible where it talks about a system of world government and religion. It goes on to talk about the presence of the triple 6, which takes away the right as a free person.

- In Netuli, we did not know who all the resource owners, the leaders and the main stakeholders in the community were. We were able to conduct the survey mainly through the help of three local VET members. The training prior to the survey for Village Recorders<sup>4</sup> and the council clerk helped us undertake the survey in five of the six wards. The sixth ward, however, was in the process of changing their Village Recorder and totally refused to work with us. This was different to Nuakata, where community leaders and members were able to convince other community members to support the survey and even offering to help with the survey work.
- The answers in the two communities were also different when they were asked what they knew about the concept of MPAs. The general understanding of MPAs was not very clear for many people in both communities. The understanding of MPAs was particularly sketchy in Netuli, although the resource owners clearly understood that their resources were under severe threat. In Nuakata, however, few respondents felt that their resources were depleted, but did understand that the adoption of MPAs would address their marine issues and so were more willing to try the concept.
- Resource ownership is still an issue with both communities, however this is far more the case in Netuli than in Nuakata. There have been two disputes over land ownership on Netuli Island itself and these have had to be resolved in court. This was not the case in Nuakata, as we had been able to deal with these issues beforehand.
- The resource owners in Netuli had already closed off certain areas for fishing, showing that they understood that their resource was overfished, but had little understanding of why or of what needed to be done. Many people therefore saw the project as a potential saviour. In Nuakata, however, people had a better understanding of resource management and of how the project would help them, i.e. by providing guidance and information. The Nuakata community also understood that their commitment was absolutely essential, as only they can save themselves.

#### **4.4 Lessons learned**

- Only three female VETs are currently involved in the community engagement program. This means that teams may be sent out on patrol without a female team member. This is because the drop-out rate for female workers is very high, largely due to the friction that long field trips can cause within families and clan groups. Ways to overcome these issues and to encourage more participation by females need to be investigated to ensure better gender equity.
- The delivery quality of technical information to communities on conservation and sustainable practices must be improved. This is to ensure that the VETS convey correct information in a consistent manner to each local community that they are working with.
- There is a need to improve the teaching aids and the materials that VETs use for their awareness raising work in communities. So far we have been using only generic advisory materials, which

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<sup>4</sup> Village Recorders are community members nominated to keep all records for the ward, including births, deaths, immigration, emigration and infrastructure development. They are normally regarded as part of the government system at the village level.

have to be translated by the VETs themselves into the local language. This is currently being done in an informal way.

- The current criteria for recruitment of VETs does not allow for recruitment of trainers from the wider provincial area. This has meant that we will have to continuously be recruiting and training new trainers every time we move to a new community.
- The level of education of trainers needs to be considered more seriously when selecting trainers in future because of the increased roles and responsibilities they will be required to take on. For example, four VETs have now been trained as certified divers to assist in marine surveys and two VETs have been trained in genealogical work. Other VETs will move into positions as village coordinators or facilitators as we move into the other zones of the project.
- There is also a need to clearly explain the aim of the project and the role of each partner organisation. Some communities have said the government was collaborating with the CBC&MCP to take over their resources, or that the project was the government in disguise, as only the government were responsible for community services. This was by far our biggest challenge and still is.
- The understanding of the concept of MPAs, conservation and sustainable harvesting are difficult to understand by communities. Melanesian communities are accustomed to learning by doing and so trying to explain a concept they cannot see was always going to be hard. Communities are therefore more likely to fully understand once we have actual MPAs set up and operating so that they can see the benefits for themselves.
- Communities are deeply in need of programs that facilitate community realisation and awareness about their own abilities, their own rights and their responsibilities towards their environment. In particular, they need to understand how their own decisions will shape their own future. This self-empowerment is a key aspect of the CEP.

#### **4.5 Main successes**

Success is often viewed differently depending on one's perspective. For the community, success of the community engagement program has been the chance for their voice to be heard and for information to flow into the village via the VETs. Success in the long term might also mean an increase in harvests of marine resources, which translates into higher incomes. From the project's viewpoint, the community engagement program has been successful in that participating communities have made their interests in managing their natural marine resources known to project staff.

The project has also been very successful in engaging community members to be facilitators for their own communities, thereby empowering them to decide what management system was most suitable for their natural resources.

The success of the community engagement program can also be seen by how far the project has progressed to date. More and more requests for assistance from communities are being registered by the project, especially from areas where we have not currently extended our work. This is largely

based on the work of the VETs, who have undertaken seven field visits to 22 communities throughout the province. Six of these communities have registered their interest in being chosen as candidate MPA sites and negotiations have begun to start the establishment of management plans. The fact that we use local people living in villages helps to spread the word about the project.

Conservation International's Melanesian Center for Biodiversity Conservation (CBC) now also views our community engagement program as being the best way forward to ensure that the CBC will achieve significant progress in the protection of natural resources by local communities. In particular, the CEP offers a possible way forward to help protect high biodiversity areas by local communities, which have been ineffective to date.

Involvement in the project has resulted in an increase in the skills base for many VETs. Four VETs have been given on-the-job training to take on more skilled duties, such as conducting marine surveys using scuba, species identification and reef mapping work. Another two VETs have been trained in genealogical research work, which involves the identification of clans, sub-clans, migration routes, family trees and stories. All of these skills will be valuable when natural resource management work is undertaken in the province in the future.

## **5. Conclusion**

The community engagement program for the CBC&MCP is the beginning of a journey towards a sustainable natural resource management and improved livelihood opportunities for the people of Milne Bay.

The program has made an invaluable contribution to the progress of this project. Now that the project is beginning to create locally-managed marine areas, this will see the VETs role change from one of initial information distribution to project facilitation and technical assistance. For this reason, we will need to make adjustments in both the CEP and the VET system to allow for the changes.

## **6. Acknowledgments**

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