



PACIFIC REGIONAL WORKSHOP FOR TRADITIONAL BOAT BUILDERS

15 & 16 FEBRUARY 2022
1PM - 4PM FIJI TIME

In partnership with:

giz Deutsche Gesellschaft
für Internationale
Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH

Contribution to the IWSA Newsletter – April 2022

1. On 15 and 16 February, the Sustainable Sea Transport Initiative (SSTI) organized a regional workshop for traditional boat builders of the Pacific. Can you briefly describe the meeting and its objectives?

The regional workshop of Pacific traditional boat builders gathered around 60 participants across the Pacific states and territories, from Papua New Guinea to French Polynesia and from Guam to New Zealand. It was organized as a Pacific “Talanoa”, a session during which participants were gathering, exchanging information on current projects, sharing their experience, talking through opportunities and challenges they are facing, and discussing possible solutions and ways forward.

Countries connected virtually, and some small national groups joined as a collective in their areas to participate together, especially groups from the Marshall Islands and Fiji. The workshop was the first of its kind focusing on the sector of traditional boat building at the regional level; and it has indeed raised a high level of interest from boat builders across the Pacific.

While the core group of participants were the boat builders themselves, other stakeholders and partners which are contributing to the sector’s activity were also invited – traditional voyagers and sailors, academics, connected industries such as sustainable tourism; including representatives of regulatory bodies and regional cooperation organizations, that can contribute to improving the sector’s development.

The workshop was the start of a dynamic at the regional level, that aims at the creation of a more permanent regional network of boat builders; eventually, participants will be able to reach out to this network when looking for answers on specific technical, conceptual, or organizational matters. The workshop was also the occasion to link the boat building activities to the larger picture of sustainable development in our Pacific Islands countries, at the national and community level. For a variety of reasons, traditional boat builders are an inherent and important part of the Pacific islands’ social fabric; their activity contribute to economic development while preserving traditional and culture knowledge.

2. Can you elaborate on the challenges that traditional boat builders are facing in the Pacific, and how it connects with the broader goals of greening the maritime sector?

The meeting was an opportunity for the traditional boat builders to understand that they are an integral part of the maritime industry and can have some concrete representation through an industry association. Also as stated earlier, these meetings do not take place often and when they do, it is generally done in isolation from the rest of the maritime industry. This means that stakeholders from traditional maritime and commercial maritime do not have a forum that provides an opportunity to meet and connect, especially at a regional level, although many of their challenges are common or related.

At SSTI, we are strong proponents of the “Pacific Way”, the virtue of talking through issues together. Some of these boat builders and voyagers know each other already, interact one-to-one, sometime even on a regular basis; but not as a group. We believe it is important that the sector’s players realize that they are, in fact, representing a solid group of like-minded organizations and individuals, with ideas that can help others and the group, and foster the sector’s development as a whole.

At the broader level, we also believe that the maritime sector in Oceania, especially regarding intra-lagoon and inter-island shipping, is highly inefficient and that there is huge gap between the existing offer, and the needs of the local communities. Most of the sector is hugely reliant on fossil fuels: in some PICs using up to 50% of all imported fuel on subsidized routes using large, old and polluting ferries that require large infrastructures; or employing small, highly inefficient and expensive to run fiber boats that often do present major safety concerns.

We do believe that traditional boat builders – and boat builders inspired by traditional designs and techniques – can offer solutions to developing new supply chain options based on wind-powered vessels in a region where accessibility, and therefore sustainable growth but also food security (or disaster response!) are major challenges that will only grow in the years to come. And compared to what prevails now, the traditional boat building sector can do it in a way which is sustainable, both environmentally and socially.

3. What are some of the other initiatives that SSTI is currently working on?

SSTI came to life about a year and half ago as the new industry association for Sustainable Sea Transport in Fiji and Oceania. The association is therefore still technically nascent but gathers individuals within a broad spectrum of knowledge and skills, with a wealth of experience – and many projects and activities in their trail.

As an industry association SSTI aims at developing and promoting efficient supply-chain solutions in the Pacific Island countries, incorporating the use of low and zero carbon emission vessels. Initially this will be piloted via the transport of goods, and will be eventually extended to passengers. We are currently reflecting on deploying sailing boats with auxiliary electric engines, with ship designs that use modern material and apply innovative shipbuilding designs and methods. These have been inspired by proven traditional sailing concepts which highlights the importance of incorporating traditional boat building knowledge – an attractive dimension for local communities, but also for the sector of sustainable tourism in the Pacific countries.

Among our current projects, we are working to launch a prototype sailing cargo-proa this year (2022) in Suva. This is to test the viability of this type of vessel to provide freight transportation on shipping routes to remote islands communities that currently experience poor accessibility. It is aimed at demonstrating the need to move away from very large and fuel thirsty vessels that provide a monthly service, to smaller, faster and wind powered vessels that could potentially visit remote communities 2-3 times in a week.

The ship is 24 meters long and carries up to 10 tons of cargo; it is affordable to build, cheaper to maintain and can operate with 2 crew; it is very versatile, has a shallow draft and doesn’t require large wharf or jetty infrastructure – this will allow the vessel to beach in shallow areas

or dock at small community jetties, and at the very least will match the speed of the current RORO ferries in most of Fiji's wind conditions. It is a very exciting project that we will also present at the workshop as we believe in sharing innovative solutions as early as possible allows for better collaborative opportunities for the region. We will be communicating more as the project unfolds in the coming months!

In co-ordination with other partners, we are also reflecting at developing a "Sustainable Sea Transport Lab" in Suva. Intended as a small facility with a regional reach, that will expand the testing of the vessels itself to other dimensions of maritime transport improving the sector's sustainability: the integration of electric propulsion of course, the development of dedicated information and communication technology (keywords: data processing, weather routing); but also the development of new logistic solutions (logistics hubs, new modular freight handling systems), designing environmental friendly infrastructures (green jetties), etc.

In a nutshell: a place where like-minded ocean innovators grounded in the Pacific culture can meet and test their ideas, in real-life. This is of course a longer-haul project, but one that raises a lot of interest among stakeholders and partners. While Fiji is an early choice for such a regional "incubator" this will need to be considered as one of several possibilities around the region as it will need to be developed with a regional dimension in mind. It is essentially envisioned to be a project that will become a shared initiative beyond borders.