

DEVELOPMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF THE MARSHALL ISLANDS AND THE USP EXTENSION PROGRAMME

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In 1991, the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) became the 12th member country of the University of the South Pacific (USP). Because this eventuated after the initiation of NIME's research project in the Pacific Islands, and because there has yet to be established an Extension Studies Centre in the RMI, the research teams were unable to visit the Marshall Islands.¹ However, what follows is a brief description of the Marshall Islands and its development concerns with regard to higher education as well as the RMI-USP relationship and its expected direction. This information is presented in the hopes of helping to complete the picture of higher education in the Pacific region as well as provide points of comparison with data presented in the other chapters.

A. DEMOGRAPHIC AND DEVELOPMENTAL BACKGROUND

The RMI consists of 29 atolls and 5 coral islands in the Central Pacific. There are some 26 populated islands distributed along two roughly parallel chains: the eastern Ratak (Sunrise) group and the western Ralik (Sunset) group. The total land area is approximately 181 square kilometers with a total lagoon area of 11,672 square kilometers. The sea area of the RMI is over 2 million square kilometers. The atolls that comprise the Marshall Islands possess extremely poor soil, experience great variability in rainfall (especially in the northern atolls). Land area is scarce for residential or agricultural use and limited in regard to its productivity. Marine resources are therefore of crucial significance in supplementing food grown on the atolls.

Since 1958, the population of the Marshall Islands has been growing rapidly with an annual average growth rate of 3.8 percent. The decade of the 1980s recorded the highest annual growth rate of 4.2 percent resulting in a total population of 43,380 at the last census (1988). As one result of this explosive growth rate, 51 percent of the population are 14 years of age or younger; presenting considerable problems for present and future education needs.

Almost half of the population lives on the capital island, Majuro Atoll, where there are many primary schools, the main government secondary school, and several private secondary schools (one cooperative, another sponsored by the Catholic Church and another under the direction of the Mormon Church). On Ebeye, where another 20 percent of the population reside, there are several primary schools and one secondary school. The remaining nearly 40 percent of the population are scattered among what have come to be called the "outer islands." Most have at least one primary school, while the only other secondary schools outside of Majuro and Ebeye are located on Jaluit and Wotje atolls. In 1989, there were a total of 94 primary schools in operation (74 public and 20 private). With a student population of 13,130 in all grades and 11,220 of these in the first eight grades, student to teacher ratios average just over 24:1 (slightly better for private schools with just

over 18:1). School enrolments significantly drop after grade eight.

As in the case of similar atoll countries (e.g., Kiribati or Tuvalu), RMI's development is limited by its small size, lack of on-shore resources, distances to overseas markets, problems of communications, and risks of natural disasters. Land, minerals, energy resources, fresh water, flora and fauna, are all limited in amount and variety. The major agricultural resource is 22,000 acres of coconut plantations of which only 16,000 acres are currently productive, yet coconut products account for 90 percent of exports (coconut oil and copra). Individual income from copra production is quite modest, averaging only US\$3.00 per male producer per day. Copra production also tends to be goal oriented, aimed at producing enough to purchase specific items or paying school fees. This may be a determining factor in the relatively high mobility of outer island Marshallese as they seek better opportunities in the more urbanized centres or overseas. Be this as it may, it is the territorial waters of the Marshall Islands that provide abundant marine resources for local consumption and export and what the government considers — along with tourism — to be the greatest potential for future economic growth.

The modern sector, based almost exclusively in Majuro and Kwajalein, is sustained largely by the RMI Government and the US missile range on Kwajalein through their expenditures. Wages, salaries and other compensation paid to employees from these two sources (which include all government school employees) are the major determinants of the GDP and contributed over 50 percent in 1990. The largest government service sector is education, even despite recent funding cut-backs. Unfortunately, many Marshallese aspiring to higher positions within the Public Service see teaching as the "low rung" on the ladder of advancement in government service and endeavor to move on as rapidly as possible. This frequently results in a rapid turn-over of teaching staff. Furthermore, because of rapid staffing turn-overs, the RMI has turned to recruiting teachers from outside the Marshall Islands, mostly from the United States and Fiji, subsequently placing additional strain on the education budget. The service sector of the economy (including government employment) accounts for 69 percent of all employment, while agriculture and fishing make up just over 21 percent and manufacturing 9 percent.²

Development efforts in the RMI, since ratification of the Compact of Free Association in 1986, has focused specifically on fostering economic growth. Primarily, the government has chosen to concentrate on three areas; fisheries and marine resources, tourism, and light industry. Discussion has focused on developing a local fishing fleet to service, primarily, the sashimi market for fresh tuna. Purchase of a DC-8 to add to the government owned national airline [Air Marshall Islands] was justified on the grounds that its larger cargo hold will be used to fly tuna to the fish auction in Hawaii. It was also expected that the larger seating capacity would contribute to increasing tourist traffic. Aquaculture projects such as giant clams, trochus, pearls and edible seaweed, have also been discussed as showing economic viability but have not been vigorously pursued.

Tourism is really in its infancy in the RMI and much is being invested to increase hotel accommodation, promote the construction of outer island "guest houses," and to develop and promote tourist attractions. Sport fishing, diving and the RMI as a "tourism adventure," are some

of the projects being discussed. It has been argued that the RMI's beaches and clear lagoons, with World War II relics and friendly people, are its main attractions: particularly in the outer islands, since the urbanized areas appear to suffer from extreme environmental degradation.

In both of these cases, marine resources and tourism, issues surrounding the environment and environmental preservation are seen as central to "sustainable development." The RMI Government, in the past, entertained various ideas and schemes which created substantial outcries, both internationally and locally, over their potential negative impact on the environment. Environmental issues have now come to be of such political and popular concern that it has become a matter of public policy that all development efforts must first have an environmental impact assessment before progressing and the national development plans must contain a "state of the environment" report. Likewise, the RMI Environmental Protection Authority has had its powers increased and its role expanded. One positive outcome from this new-found environmental awareness has been the "Cans for Kids" programme which recycles aluminum cans with the profits going to support education. On the more ominous side however, issues of global warming and potential sea level rise have cast a shadow over present development efforts and raised much concern over future national viability.

Light industry developments have focused mostly on promoting support services for a national fishing fleet; ship repair and fuel depot, cannery facilities, etc. Some recent efforts have also been put into upgrading the copra processing facilities in conjunction with increasing power generation capacity. Large construction projects like the new capital building complex and urban infrastructure improvements have also been undertaken.

B. HUMAN RESOURCES & DEVELOPMENT CONCERNS

When examining the issues of development, several concerns on the part of RMI citizens surface. First, much concern is expressed over the seemingly disproportionate amount of money being spent on "large" development projects while important government services — such as education — have had their budgets cut. Past and present policy has tended to cater to large-scale development projects relying on joint-venture foreign capital and/or overseas development loans to build office buildings, resorts, and light-industry projects. This has resulted in a current national debt of nearly US\$125 million by some estimates, and the apparent diversion of monies from education and social services to fund government's "other" priority projects. It has been argued that, over the last 40 years of the US Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands administration, nothing really happened to significantly develop the RMI. Now, the impression is that the present government is trying to make up for lost time with "big capital" projects. Many, alternatively, have argued for small-scale fisheries, diversified marine resource developments, and a "go slow," cottage-based approach to tourism along with vocational oriented human resource development as more appropriate in the RMI context and as being a more "affordable" type of development; economically, ecologically, socially, and culturally.

The second expressed concern, that of human resource development, has been perceived as

taking a back seat to economic development despite government rhetoric to the contrary. Presently, the Education Department reports some staggering figures [cf., AED 1989]. In broad terms 25 percent of first grade students are dropping out before finishing junior high school. For those who graduate from junior high school, 30 percent do not even get into high schools because there is not enough room for them. Of those who do get into public high schools, 30 percent drop out before graduation (50 percent when private high schools are excluded). Only 10 percent of high school graduates go on to college, and of these nearly 60 percent drop out within their first two years. As of 1989 (the latest year for which reliable figures are available), there were 117 Marshallese engaged in tertiary education abroad under sponsorship of the Marshall Islands Scholarship, Grant and Loan programme run by the Ministry of Education. Of the 117 students, 80 of these are ongoing students while 18 have dropped out or withdrawn and 19 had already graduated. Whereas these figures are not very flattering, the real concern is with the RMI's present youthful population (over 50 percent 14 years of age or younger) and rapid population growth rate. If steps are not taken to address these problems, the education situation at the primary and secondary level will become increasingly untenable and a likely "social time bomb," while tertiary education is seen as becoming even more exclusionist. The Ministry of Education now has a ten year master plan (in its fourth year of implementation) designed to improve education and human resource development, including the possible use of satellite-based instruction for the outer islands. However, they admit that without the budget to realize the goals outlined in the master plan, "...it is just so much paper."

Compounding this problem is the lack of visible improvement to the standard of living in the outer islands forcing many to migrate into the district centres (Majuro and Ebeye) seeking employment possibilities. Because success rates for students entering colleges and universities in the US have been fairly disappointing, and despite the fact that nearly 85 percent of graduates returned to the Marshall Islands, very few of the returning graduates had the kind of training needed to fill shortages in professional manpower. Therefore, the low levels of skilled labour in the RMI (despite the relatively large pool of unskilled and semi-skilled labour) have resulted in many of the higher-paying jobs in the construction and service industries going to overseas nationals (mainly Korean and Filipino contract workers). Because of these conditions, there is a perceived need, addressed by the education master plan, for increased focus on vocational training to reverse the trend. However, for those who do find employment, many face frustration due to a lack of upward mobility and a degradation of their standard of living due to an increasing dependency ratio (the result of an explosive population growth rate, and relatives moving in from the outer islands). Those with marketable skills are frequently deciding to leave for the United States where they have free migration access and can get higher paying jobs.

Marshall Islanders have long depended on external colleges and universities for post-secondary education and on scholarships and other forms of financial aid for access to such opportunities. The opportunity to attend college was highly selective until the early 1970s when the full array of student financial aid programmes of the United States Government was extended to citizens of the Marshall Islands (as well as other citizens of the former Trust Territory). These grants and loans

from the US Government provided relatively easy access to college for substantial numbers of Marshallese high school graduates (AED 1989). Indeed, many of the Marshallese currently resident outside of the RMI originally left to attend universities in the United States under RMI Government scholarships or US Pell Grants (Hezel & Levin 1990). Since the scholarships frequently only covered tuition and books, many had to seek part-time employment to make ends meet. Many of those who were already married and left after the Compact came into force, took their spouses (and children, if any) with them when they left to study in the US. Prior to the Compact, bringing one's family was not allowed, nor were students allowed to seek employment — though many did illegally. Those who could not finish college, took up full-time employment in the US; some of the single students married Americans and settled down in the US. Of those who graduated, the majority returned to the RMI. However, many of those who returned did so only to marry and then emigrated with their spouse to the US to take up their employment where they left off. Typically, those who left for schooling or vocational training programmes (e.g., Job Corps) of relatively shorter duration or who already had good job positions in the RMI, returned to them after completing their schooling or training. Those who were on relatively longer schooling and/or training programmes without such job security (typically those students just out of high school) were far less likely to return.

These people end up staying for prolonged periods of time outside of their home country, usually returning only for brief visits. Likewise, because of the better educational opportunities presented for their children in the US in comparison with what is available in the RMI most are likely to be life-time migrants, thus representing a permanent loss of skilled man-power. It is exactly these conditions that present the most demanding challenges to the provision of higher education (distance or otherwise) in the Marshall Islands are ones that the present relationship with USP are expected to help address.

C. RMI'S RELATIONSHIP WITH USP

Soon after the Marshall Islands became full members of the South Pacific Forum, negotiations began on the establishment of its membership in USP. Following over two years of discussions, the RMI became a member of USP with the right to have a representative on the University Council and to send four students per year to the main campus of USP in Suva, Fiji. At present, the RMI has four full-time internal students registered at USP with an additional 25 students having, at one time or another, having taken (or currently taking) training courses through USP's Institute of Education (USP 1991). It is expected that the Marshall Islands will also establish, in due course, a Regional Centre similar to the centres which have been set-up in all other member countries (except Tokelau). Negotiations are also moving forward to establish a special relationship between USP and the newly organized College of the Marshall Islands (formerly the nurses' training campus of the College of Micronesia located in Majuro). Plans are underway to have the USP Extension Centre housed on the campus of the College of the Marshall Islands and to coordinate the courses offered so as to complement both programmes. Former Secretary of Education, Ms. Marie

Maddison, indicated at the time of the RMI's formal acceptance into membership of USP (14 February 1991) that belonging to the USP system presents great opportunities for Marshallese students (MIJ 1991 March 15).

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1 Unless otherwise indicated, all data related to the Marshall Islands comes from the RMI Office of Planning and Statistics, Majuro.

2 As a point of clarification, manufacturing consists mostly of handicrafts and copra processing, and accounts for less than one percent of GDP.