



Improving Skills Development for the Youth and Women in the Republic of Marshall Islands

Today, the Marshall Islands is one of the most urbanized island-countries in the Pacific with almost 70% of its 57,000 total population concentrated on the two small atolls of Majuro and Ebeye. The remainder of the population lives on 19 outer islands, most having fewer than 500 residents.¹

But beyond the Marshall Islands' picturesque and tranquil setting, the country suffers from rapid population growth, a lack of natural resources, accelerated sea level rise,² underdeveloped human resources with poor labor market skills, isolation, and inadequate infrastructure. A major economic concern is that the labor force is growing much faster than wage employment and in the coming years will pose immense challenges for young people and society as a whole.³

Upgrading People's Skills

The shortage of skills at all levels had always been a major barrier to the Marshall Islands' sustainable economic growth. The Government's efforts to improve the socioeconomic conditions and the living standards of the people and increase employment and income-generating opportunities, especially for women and the youth in the outer islands, have been hampered by the lack of skilled workers and training and income-generating opportunities. The National Training Council (NTC), established under the Industries Development Act of 1991 to serve as the overall coordinating body for skills training in the Marshall Islands, had not been active for lack of funds. Vocational educational programs integrated into the formal educational system lacked relevance to the work environment, were not well organized, and were ineffective in introducing

students to the vocational options open to them. More often, these programs lacked facilities, equipment and tools, operating funds, trained teachers, and teaching materials.⁴

The Government planned to address this concern by "upgrading the skills training system into a comprehensive, integrated, and efficient national training system incorporating the establishment of skills standards and certification as well as income-generating activities for women and school dropouts."⁵ To support the Government's efforts, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) in 2000 approved the Skills Training and Vocational Education Project⁶ comprising four components: developing a career awareness program, improving skills training, enhancing skills training opportunities for women and youth, and institutional strengthening.

Among the key outputs of the project were:

- Development of a career awareness program for public high schools, including career orientation and counseling programs, and training and counseling support. Training kits, teaching materials (including a locally produced teacher's guide), equipment, and reference materials were distributed to all high schools.
- Two-tiered skills training program was initiated focusing on the English language, mathematics, computer studies, and career awareness to high school age students who are unable to attend regular high school.

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- Construction of one-stop centers on Majuro, Jaluit, and Wotje intended to act as clearing and training referral centers offering services such as direct job referral to qualified applicants; and referral to training, counseling, academic improvement, or other employment readiness programs.
- Construction of training units for women and youth were completed on Jaluit and Wotje. Both training units were constructed on public high school campuses. A business plan and organizational program were prepared for the units.
- The Women's Training, Marketing, and Information Center was constructed in Majuro for training programs which included young mother and children nutrition and child care, community development, and handicraft.
- A pilot aquaculture farm at Jaluit High School was funded and 20 students, including 10 girls, have taken part in the ongoing program. Clams, spat, and coral have been sold to local businesses. The outer island training rooms on Jalu have been used to give seminars and workshops on aquaculture, including black pearl farming.
- Skills-based training strategies to increase income generation and enhance life skills on the outer atolls have been widely distributed in the Marshall Islands, involving nongovernment organizations, the National Training Council, and the National Vocational Training Institute.
- A management information system was installed and a working plan for collection of data has also been produced.

Laying the Foundation for Skills Development

Based on the 2006 project completion report,⁷ the project has laid some foundation for a skills and vocational education program in the Marshall Islands through the development of infrastructure and curriculum development outputs. However, institutional and human capacity were not sufficiently strong to effectively carry out and take forward the business plans and utilize the infrastructure built, equipment procured, and materials prepared with project assistance.

The skills training programs however, suffered from limited faculty resources, inadequate labor market analysis, and a corresponding set of agreed skills standards. The completion report noted that the project provided greater focus on civil work and equipment procurement, overlooking institutional development and capacity building.

To optimize project gains, particularly the training infrastructure and curriculum materials developed, it was recommended that business plans for all skills training centers and units must be updated regularly. Also, sufficient funds for the operations of the skills training centers should be allocated and made available yearly. The more fundamental recommendations were to undertake periodic labor market analyses and define skills standards while ensuring that larger issues, such as the low level of basic education, which inhibits vocational skills or other skills training, be likewise addressed.

The lessons learned from project design to implementation served as inputs to the country strategy, program, and project formulation for the Marshall Islands.

Endnotes

- ¹ Asian Development Bank (ADB) website. www.adb.org/MarshallIslands/country-info.asp
- ² The highest point in the country is only 10 meters above sea level, placing the country at risk from rising sea levels associated with global warming.
- ³ Government of the Republic of the Marshall Islands (with assistance from UNICEF). 2003. *Republic of the Marshall Islands: A Situation Analysis of Children, Youth and Women*. www.unicef.org/pacificislands/RML_SITAN.pdf
- ⁴ ADB. 2000. *Report and Recommendation of the President to the Board of Directors on a Proposed Loan to the Republic of the Marshall Islands for the Skills Training and Vocational Education Project*. www.adb.org/Documents/Rrps/Rmi/Rrp-33166-Rmi.Pdf#Page=58
- ⁵ ADB. 2000. *Report and Recommendation of the President to the Board of Directors on a Proposed Loan to the Republic of the Marshall Islands for the Skills Training and Vocational Education Project*. www.adb.org/Documents/Rrps/Rmi/Rrp-33166-Rmi.Pdf#Page=58
- ⁶ Loan 1791 RMI Skills Training and Vocational Education Project. Approval Date: November 2000. Completion Date: October 2005. Amount of ADB loan: \$6.825 million. Executing Agency: Ministry of Education.
- ⁷ ADB. 2006. *The Marshall Islands: Skills Training and Vocational Education Project*. www.adb.org/Documents/PCRs/RMI/33166-RMI-PCR.pdf

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