

\*Story developed for Communications for Change (cChange)

SENITIKI Naoko often felt embarrassed whenever people asked him what the tikina of Dama had done for its children.

Tired of being speechless, the 54-year-old from Nawaca Village set out to find the words for a reply.

As mata ni tikina in 2005, he approached the leaders of Dama with a plan. Five years on, Naoko reminisces with pride the bold step he took.

“As mata ni tikina for Dama district, I was often asked who paid for the education of the children in the district. It pained me and I always felt embarrassed because there was nothing the tikina had done for the children.

“I consulted the tikina leaders and suggested that we introduce marine protected areas and ban fishing in those areas so marine life could breed and after a few years we could choose a day to harvest and sell the catch. The idea was that the money we made from selling the harvest would be put into a fund to cater for the educational needs of our children,” he said.

Naoko said some children from the village were unable to complete their secondary school studies because their parents were unable to pay for their education.

Convincing the villagers to accept the MPA plan was a big challenge.

“When I met the tikina leaders and relayed my recommendation for MPAs in our waters, I could already hear the disapproval and disappointment from people who were gathered outside the meeting venue. The common worry among the people was where they would get food from and how would they earn money if the fishing areas were restricted. I told them there was a lot of land on which they could plant and explained that only certain portions of the sea would be restricted so they could fish in the other areas.”

Following that meeting, the tikina confirmed Tatava Reef as an MPA, in addition to the separate MPAs in the seven villages that make up the tikina.

“There were people who remained sceptical years after the MPA was established but just two years into the tabu, women who usually go out fishing or to gather crabs noticed that certain marine life that had disappeared from our fishing areas had returned and were breeding in the MPA.

“In five years, we’ve only lifted the ban once to accommodate for a funeral. The next harvest will be a big one, one which will fulfil the purpose of the MPA. We are proud to say that the tikina is now able to cater for the educational needs of our children and that no child from Dama will ever have to drop out of school again just because their parents can’t afford their schooling expenses.”

He envisions a future in which the next generations are educated to continue their sustainable life.