WAAN AELON IN MAJEL
Cultural Development in the Marshall Islands

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Waan Aelon in Majel, Republic of the Marshall Islands

Waan Aelon in Majel (Canoes of the Marshall Island) or “WAM” is a grassroots non-profit program educating young Marshall Islanders, based on the traditions of the Marshallese canoe. WAM provides vocational and life skills training to youth-at-risk using the medium of traditional outrigger canoes, boat building and woodworking. The program links the new generation with the old, working together to keep this unique aspect of Marshallese culture alive, while simultaneously addressing serious social problems affecting youth in Marshallese society.

WAM has, with support from the international development community, and intermittent support from the RMI Government, evolved in a dynamic manner since its foundation in 1989. WAM has introduced a range of training and development and cultural reinforcement programs, built up services, infrastructure, curriculum, and management systems for effective delivery of its mission. It has captured the deep respect, enthusiasm and support of the Marshall Islands community, and is poised to deepen and widen its contribution to the social and cultural fabric of the country.

Socio-Cultural Setting of the Marshall Islands and the Role of the Canoe
The first Marshallese are understood to have arrived in canoes from Southeast Asia over 2000 years ago. From this time the outrigger canoe has been the backbone upon which the food-gathering economy and transportation of the Marshall Islands depended. Over time most families across the islands would have several canoes, at least one larger sailing canoe and several small paddling canoes. Knowledge of traditional canoe construction was spread throughout all atolls, although this knowledge was concentrated in certain families. The knowledge of navigation was similarly closely held by master navigators that advised the Iroij or Chief, and was a source of power. Given the very small areas of land for habitation and food cultivation, the need to protect scant resources, and dependence upon fishing for survival, the outrigger became a central part of the Marshallese life, and a timeless foundation for Marshallese culture. Marshallese culture fosters a deep respect for family, tradition, traditional authority, and ancestral ties and spirit. These
attributes are intrinsically built into the process and rituals of building and sailing of canoes.

Traditional canoe building was popular in the Marshall Islands until World War II when there was significant destruction of canoes by occupying forces. After the war the Islands became part of the US Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, where widespread community disruption and displacement occurred as a consequence of US nuclear testing, and when the cash economy replaced subsistence living. At this time American/western consumer culture started to erode traditional cultural settings. In this context the community developed a perception that the old ways were unfashionable or backward, and impeding progress. Significant changes occurred, including migration of young job seekers from the outer islands to the centers of Ebeeye and Majuro, a decline in the role of traditional authority and cultural values, and the replacement of the canoe with the outboard motor boat. Coupled with this has been a loss of self-reliance, and a dependency on U.S. support and acceptance that funding from the U.S. will continue to provide for the community.

As a consequence, traditional role models (particularly for males) have largely disappeared or were no longer relevant. The high regard for excellence in boat building, the mystical skills of the master navigator, the ability to endure long voyages, bravery in protection of the community, skills in providing food from the sea and land in horticultural food production – were all replaced by a malaise among the now largely urban dwellers.

**YOUTH AT RISK**

This decline in traditional cultural values has been one of the major contributors to the emergence of a youth crisis in the RMI. About two-thirds of the Marshall Islands population is under 24 years old and is growing at one of the highest rates in the region. Coupled with this, about half of secondary age children are not attending school due to lack of classroom space and teachers, poor academic performance, inability to pay school-related costs, lack of parental interest and support, and inadequate motivation by students. This, combined with a lack of employment opportunities and lack of life- and work-skills, has led to an excessive incidence of youth idleness, increasing crime, a growing rate of gang related violence, substance abuse, sexually transmitted diseases, teenage pregnancy, depression and suicide.

**YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT**

At 30.9%, total unemployment in the Marshall Islands has almost trebled from the 1988 census figure of 12.5%. From 1998 to 1999, the number of people of working age grew by about 7,500 but there were only 85 more people employed in 1999 (a total of 10,141) than in 1988. The Marshall Islands has the highest unemployment rate of any U.S.-affiliated island in the Pacific. The situation is not likely to improve rapidly - in the absence of large changes to the economic environment, the unemployment rate is forecast to continue its historical trend of almost doubling every 10 years, anticipating that by 2014 there will be about 10,000 unemployed in a total work force of 26,000 (Figure 1). Put simply there are 600 to 1000 Marshallese entering the workforce each year, yet less than half this number of new jobs created.

The significant feature of this situation is that it is mostly young people that bear this burden. The 15-19 year age group is presently experiencing an unemployment rate of over 70%, and the 20-24 age group faring little better at around 55% unemployment (Figure 2). The true situation may be worse than indicated in the statistics, in that significant numbers of young Marshallese take advantage of a free right of access to the USA conferred on RMI citizens to seek better opportunities there.

There are two major causes of this situation. The first is that the generally low level of economic development leads to few employment opportunities. The second factor is the low level of education of youth, and corresponding lack of life skills. The combination is such that many young job seekers are largely unemployable.
Figure 1. Actual and projected labor force and wage and salary earners. Source: Labor Market and National Training Report, NTC, 2000

Figure 2. Unemployment by age group RMI, 1999
(Source RMI Statistical Yearbook 2003)

Table 1. Formal Education System Drop Out Rates

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Criterion</th>
<th>99/00</th>
<th>00/01</th>
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<th>02/03</th>
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<tr>
<td>Not completing elementary school</td>
<td>20.2%</td>
<td>19.6%</td>
<td>14.2%</td>
<td>10.9%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Completing elementary school but not transitioning to high school</td>
<td>38.6%</td>
<td>30.3%</td>
<td>30.0%</td>
<td>27.4%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Entering but not completing high school</td>
<td>53.4%</td>
<td>47.5%</td>
<td>46.9%</td>
<td>38.8%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total students starting in Grade 3 but not progressing to Grade 12</td>
<td>74.1%</td>
<td>68.3%</td>
<td>65.6%</td>
<td>66.6%</td>
</tr>
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THE EDUCATION SYSTEM
The overall dropout rate from the schooling system (number of students entering Grade 5 but not progressing to Grade 12) was around 67% in 2003. Given that almost 30% of students that complete elementary school do not progress to high school, a large proportion of young job seekers have only the most basic of education.

VOCATIONAL TRAINING
With approximately 15,000 students enrolled in 2003, this dropout rate indicates that most of the approximately 1,000 school leavers per year entering the job market have a relatively low level of educational attainment. This situation is further compounded by the lack of vocational education alternatives outside the secondary schooling system, such that youths are trapped by both limited access to further education and limited access to paid employment.

Access to pre-vocational training was until recently offered through the Workforce Investment Act (WIA). The WIA program provided funding for vocational training programs operated by government and NGOs inside RMI and overseas, but has now been folded into the role of the National Training Council (NTC). NTC is a body established under legislation to offer accreditation, and workforce planning and policy-related services. It is presently allocated funding from an alien workers employment tax, which it applies to various vocational training needs delivered by service providers in RMI and overseas. Undergoing restructure with ADB assistance, the NTC has been provided substantial funding from a U.S. Federal Supplementary Education Grant (SEG). When restructured, the NTC is also proposed to act as central coordination agency of Government and international funding for youth development and has the potential to be a future powerful force in the identification of youth needs, the sourcing of funding, and the application of this funding against vocational and life skills training, and the development of the RMI training capacity across both Government and NGO sectors.

Some vocational services have also been provided in the past through secondary-level programs, certificate and degree programs offered at the College of the Marshall Islands; U.S. grant-funded activities such as the School-to-Work Program and the Pacific Vocational Education Improvement Program; as well as community-based skill development projects. A new facility, the National Vocational Training Institute (NVTI) has been established under the Ministry of Education with ADB support.

However there is nowhere near the capacity in the Government system to accommodate all the need, and the NGO sector has evolved independently to provide an important response to the significant need. It is WAM and another NGO, Jōdrikdrik ūan Jōrikdrik Ilo Ejmour, or Youth-to-Youth in Health that have taken the lead in addressing some of the key gaps in non-formal life skills education and in vocational education, using innovative connections to traditional culture as their base. Poised and ready for service delivery, it is these and other NGOs and forward-thinking private sector participants that have the potential to widen and deepen the impact on youth and address these critical youth issues, perhaps more effectively than the formal system can accommodate.

THE WAM RESPONSE
WAM has developed a powerful program that simultaneously addresses the cultural malaise across the community as well as empowering youth through life skills and vocational skills training in this context of cultural reinforcement. WAM uses the medium of canoe and boat building and sailing to provide more than vocational training as preparation for employment, it also addresses the sense of self worth that has all but disappeared from Marshallese youth, so that even in the absence of a vibrant labor market, alumni can still play a worthwhile role in their families and communities. WAM empowers the youth by teaching them traditional and modern sustainable skills including outrigger canoe building, maintenance and repair, sailing and navigation to ensure that these unique aspects of Marshallese culture are kept
alive. With an eye to modern circumstances, WAM's program includes modern boat building and fiberglass training, woodworking and carpentry and administration in its formal curriculum. WAM builds capacity into the trainees and their trainers in a drug- and alcohol-free setting and includes counseling while also focusing upon a range of life skills and work skills.

WAM also outreaches to the wider community through participation in schools, bringing children to observe boat building and fostering involvement of parents and the community through traditional canoe racing and sailing regattas. WAM fosters community pride and self-identity in the culture through participation in international events that celebrate canoe making and traditional Pacific Island culture. As of the end of 2004, more than 4,800 students in Majuro have been served in this way since the year 2000.

VALUES AND GUIDING PRINCIPLES
The whole WAM program is anchored in a set of values and guiding principles that have been core to the organization since its formation:

- **Connection with the canoe.**—Everything that WAM does connects with the canoe and its role in the traditional Marshallese way of life. This respect for traditional Marshallese culture ("manit") is the basis for reviving the sense of community among all Marshallese - "enra im lale rara" (all share from the same plate).
- **Learning for life and for posterity.**—WAM exudes the value training and learning from the inside out, through an open sharing of knowledge and values, and of passing this down from elders and mentors to the youth of today, and to future generations. - "jake jabol eo" (share the resources).
- **Training is about generating self-awareness and self-respect.**—WAM encourages self-identity and self-respect of youth at risk and seeks to instill in participants a sense of pride in their own capacity, and in the community they belong to. WAM focuses upon empowering youths through providing educational alternatives giving disaffected youth a second chance at their lives.
- **An atmosphere of Safety and Sense of Community.**—WAM is a haven where youth can observe and participate in wholesome, productive activities, events and celebrations. It fosters a sense of community for youth based on traditional family values.
- **Quality and Professionalism.**—WAM maintains high standards of professionalism including quality of service delivery, accountability to stakeholders, and achieving successful outcomes.
- **Measured Risk Taking.**—WAM recognizes that to make a difference to youth who are themselves at risk, some measured risk taking is required. WAM continually experiments with new ideas, remains proactive in the face of uncertain funding, and accepts difficult challenges.
- **Inclusivity.**—WAM is inclusive, encompassing young men and woman from all walks of life, from all measure of circumstances, and reaches out to their parents, friends and the community.
- **Simplicity** - WAM focuses on the simplicity of its message transmitted through basic learning skills and techniques.

CANOE- AND BOATBUILDING
In accordance with the key guiding principle, the central thrust of WAM's work is around canoe making and boat building:

**Canoe Building Program**
An integrated course on canoe construction and canoe model making, canoe sailing skills and canoe maintenance skills development form the core of the WAM program. The program will cater for 14 students in two streams over a 1-year period, with students graduating with a certificate in Canoe Making endorsed by the NTC. Program output in trainees could double by 2007, after expanding the building workspace outlined in Priority Infrastructure Development, below. This is the foundation of the WAM program with all curriculum materials in place, and all instruction able to be car-
ried out with existing resources. Four additional instructors are being trained to expand the capacity of the entire program, with two earmarked for the canoe building courses. The volume of activity is constrained only in the available physical space to accommodate the two training streams. WAM will also have the ability to work with Ebeye and outer islands to duplicate the programs training output in order to reach more of the youth population. WAM sees the urgent need for this especially in Ebeye.

Over the five-year period WAM plans to grow from the present sporadic delivery of this program to coordinated delivery of two streams per year, and to build up capacity for an additional two streams during the second five-year planning period. The program can accommodate the manufacture of up to four canoes per year for sale as part of the training program, subject to the availability of materials.

**Fiberglass Boat Building Program**

WAM teaches canoe and other boat building using fiberglass technology. With a modern fiberglass workshop the program is poised to transfer key vocational skills to students who can apply these in the workforce on graduation. The facility presently has a full complement of a trainer, a trainee-instructor and has the capability to accommodate 8 students per year for a one-year course. It is planned that the facility size will be doubled to expand the program to two, two-year courses. The plan calls for achieving this and securing the future of this program by forging strategic partnerships with other vocational training service providers in the discipline including NVTI, CMI as well as other schools in the U.S. The objective is to strengthen the delivery of this program to capacity through the 5-year period.

**Navigation Training**

The ancient art of canoe navigation is at risk of extinction, with only a handful of master navigators remaining. Traditionally Marshallese were skilled open ocean navigators who relied on the stars, wave reflection and refraction, ocean currents and explicit chants to navigate to and between small atolls over vast ocean distances. This is a new program for WAM necessary to ensure the continued passing down of this skill so essential to both Marshallese tradition and the effective use of a canoe. WAM has teamed with a University of Hawaii researcher funded by the National Science Foundation, the University of Hawaii Sea Grant College Program and the Wenner-Gren Institute for Anthropological Research to document a master navigator’s knowledge. This will be developed into a formal training course in traditional non-instrument navigation during the first half of the planning period. In the second half of the planning period it is proposed that the first canoe navigation training course will be introduced with plans for integration into the regular school curriculum.

**OUTREACH**

WAM’s objective is for the program to act as a national resource, and to touch all Marshallese in some way. While the most intensive exposure is for youth undertaking the individual training programs, the WAM outreach program is aimed at multiplying this through bringing the program to schools and the general community.

**School Outreach Program**

WAM seeks to impact the lives of thousands of Marshallese by bringing cultural understanding to school children and their families at all levels. During the 5-year planning period it is proposed that WAM continues to reinforce its school outreach program through the following activities:

- Working with the Schools and the Ministry of Education under a formal Memorandum of Understanding to include the training program in the school curriculum. Portions of the program will be given as social study and cultural classes, integrating spoken and written Marshallese with the English language.
- Presentations including hands-on learning activities by WAM staff and trainees on the history and development of the Marshall Islands canoe to school classes either in
the classroom or on field trips to the WAM site.
• Development of an after-school canoe paddling and sailing, and facilities run by teachers, volunteers and community members.

Community Outreach Program
The involvement of family and friends in the program is a key ingredient to multiplying the benefits of involvement with WAM and reinforcing and sustaining the transformation achievable through the program. Community involvement is expanded by:
• Promoting the sailing of canoes for recreation, including leading the organization of races and community events.
• Engaging community volunteers to assist in the running of various aspects of the program.
• The establishment of after school youth paddling and sailing programs based at WAM with parental and community support.
• Environmental Conservation Project for a Shoreline and Underwater Site for Community Education, Demonstration and Capacity Building.

EXPANDED VOCATIONAL SKILLS AND LIVELIHOODS PROGRAM
While boat building is an end in itself, the skills developed in the program, and the employability of students is significantly enhanced by including mainstream carpentry, woodworking, furniture and cabinet making in the program. These activities also offer the opportunity to increase non-donor funding through commercial contracts, and allows a greater volume of trainees to be handled at any one time.

Carpentry and Woodworking Program
The carpentry activity has already commenced on a small scale with regard to the construction of a community youth center in partnership with the Youth-to-Youth- in-Health NGO, and with the construction of much of WAM’s own buildings. The thrust of this activity for the next five years is for WAM to secure more building contracts or subcontracts, particularly in house- or wooden- building construction that requires a high degree of carpentry skills. A good avenue of partnership would be with the USDA and Marshall Islands Development Bank home loans where trainees could work with families to construct their homes. The experience will also be used to help trainees to develop the capacity to generate their own livelihoods after graduation as contract carpenters, given that this is a skill area that is presently heavily imported into RMI. The plan calls for the development of a steady program of carpentry training involving basic woodworking skills taught during contracted building jobs to support up to 7 carpentry trainees and the development of a carpentry/woodworking shop to support this work.

Furniture and Cabinet Making Programs
The skills employed in canoe making and carpentry derives from the same basic woodworking skills taught in all programs. These skills can be expanded to include the manufacture of furniture and cabinets and a wide range of other products, including many traditional craft items, the construction of which both reinforces traditional skills, and communicates Marshallese culture and craft to visitors to the islands. Additionally, the making of both furniture and tourist artifacts offers potential livelihood alternatives for graduates. Furniture making and woodworking can also provide both a source of income to support WAM programs and reduce dependence upon external donors. A curriculum has already been developed for furniture making and another is in preparation for woodworking with the trainee and trainers manuals in concept form. The strategic plan is based upon the development of parallel programs in each stream of furniture making and woodworking for commencement in the mid term of the planning period, entailing the engaging of an additional trainer and trainer's assistant, and the development of a woodworking building, a furniture making building, and acquisition of appropriate tools and machinery. (See below regarding WAM physical infrastructure development). This will
generate the capacity for a program of 7 students over a period of 1 year in both programs, articulating from the existing basic woodworking training common to all streams, and it is planned that this intake will commence in 2008 or earlier depending on funding.

Geographic Expansion
The core strategy is based upon training Marshallese from outer islands and encouraging them to return to their communities and transfer their knowledge and skills. However there is strong demand from other communities for something more substantive such as a replication of some of the core WAM services and concepts. WAM’s strategy is not to replicate the functions at Majuro itself, which will remain open to all Marshallese able to travel to and live in Majuro, but to facilitate and assist the local communities to set up those elements of WAM for themselves, and build together a network of programs that make use of the ground breaking work that WAM has undertaken. It is anticipated that these satellite developments may be the development of basic canoe building facilities, or setting up paddling and sailing clubs or more comprehensive, depending upon community willingness and access to resources.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY AND CONTACT
In the early 80’s after returning from extended trips to Fiji, where he unsuccessfully tried to start a local boatbuilding and fisheries training program, Dennis decided to get back to the water and boats full time, so he moved to the Puget Sound and met master boat builder, Robert Prothero, who had just started a boatbuilding school. Bob, a Welshman, had decided to share his family knowledge of building boats, which had been held secret for 500 years. He taught Dennis the art of economic craftsmanship through the medium of traditional wooden boatbuilding and lofting and together, they designed a philosophy of instruction related to international vocational studies with traditional boatbuilding as the medium of skill exchange. Dennis stayed with Bob until he passed away of cancer.

In 1987 Dennis was hired to coordinate and supervise all joinery woodworking on the Tole Mour, a 156 foot, three-masted topsail schooner to be built as a floating clinic for outer island heath care in the Republic of the Marshall Islands. Upon commissioning of the vessel, he served as shipwright and deck crew on the maiden voyage, down the coast of Washington, Oregon and California, to Honolulu, where he coordinated the outfitting of the ship’s medical facilities before they ran downwind and landed in Majuro on December 2, 1988.

Shortly after arriving in the Marshall Islands, Dennis was asked to work with a traditional canoe builder, Jinarde Leon, who was from Jaluit Atoll. Jinarde had donated his canoe to the Field Museum in Chicago, who used it in a permanent exhibit called Traveling the Pacific. In payment, Jinarde wanted a replacement canoe, but with the hull built from plywood. Dennis thought this was a great project but had already agreed to another ship project in Europe. While there, he began researching about the indigenous canoes of the Pacific. The information he found was done mostly by scholars, finding no information about the craft documented by a boat builder, which he was especially interested in finding.

While building the canoe and talking with Jinarde and many others, Dennis realized that the knowledge of building canoes was rapidly disappearing, as the skill was not being passed down to the younger generation for whatever reason. This gave Dennis the idea of documenting the designs and styles of Marshallese Outrigger Canoes, so he brought up the idea to Alfred Capelle, who was the curator of the Alele Museum at the time. Alfred liked the idea and from that, the documentation phase of the Waan Aelon Kein (Canoes of These Islands) Project was born. During the 7 years of the documentation project more than 160 aspiring canoe builders were able to learn canoe building skills.

When the documentation phase of the program ended, both Alson and Dennis realized that many of the youth were interested in learning these skills. They founded the Waan Aelon in Majel Program in 1996 and in 1999, they incorporated WAM as a non-profit Non Government Organization.

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