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Community Visioning: A strategy for Sustainable Island Living?

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Full Text

The Republic of Palau

The Republic of Palau is a group of more than 500 islands located in the tropical western Pacific Ocean – the most western of the Caroline Islands group, and is part of the sub-region known as Micronesia. Composed of two primary sets of islands, the Main Palau Islands extend from 6°53' to 8°12' N and from 134°08' to 134°44' E while the Southwest Islands are located up to 600 km from the main islands and are at 2°59' N to 5°21' N and from 131°49' to 132°13' E. Palau is relatively close to Southeast Asia, especially the Philippines and Indonesia, and as a result shares some of the flora and fauna of Southeast Asia that has not dispersed through the rest of the Micronesian islands. For instance, Palau is the easternmost extent of the range for saltwater crocodiles and dugong in the region.

Most well-renown for its spectacular marine environment, Palau shelters the most diverse forests in Micronesia. An estimated 80% of Palau's big island of Babeldaob (Micronesia's second largest island) is covered in native forest, including upland, mangrove, swamp, limestone, Rock Island, agro-forest, plantation and palm forest. These forests provide habitat for many unique animals and help to maintain the nation's freshwater supply; this forest cover is also crucial to maintaining the nutrient balance that flows into the pristine marine environment.

Of Palau's 1260 species of plants, 25% are believed to be endemic to Palau. Animal endemism is also high. Palau has an estimated 3,000-6,000 terrestrial insect species, with a 26% endemism rate. There are 46 species of reptiles and amphibians in Palau, with 1 known endemic frog, 9 endemic lizards, and 2 endemic snakes. The forests are home to 40-50 documented species of native lands snails, however many more remain undocumented.

The total population of Palau is roughly 20,000 with the majority of the population (just over 13,000) indigenous Palauans. Traditionally and politically, Palau is made up of 16 states. Each state's governance structure includes traditional leadership, a Governor and state legislature. Historically, Palau underwent a century of foreign administration before gaining independence in the mid-1990s and was the center of Japan's Pacific administration just prior to, and during, WWII. Today, Palau's economy, largely subsistence (with an emphasis on hunting, fishing, gathering and farming mainly taro, cassava and fruits), is also based in tourism, fisheries and agriculture, and, substantially driven by the revenues resulting from a treaty known as the Compact of Free

Association (COFA) with the United States. The terms of the COFA treaty, entered into in 1994 when Palau obtained sovereignty, are up for renegotiation in 2009 and include the construction of a 52 mile circumferential road on Babeldaob Island. This road is commonly referred to as the "Compact Road". The construction of the Compact Road, the largest development project in the history of Micronesia, has opened Micronesia's largest and most biodiverse, pristine, contiguous forest to ready access, whereas before only coastal areas were accessible by boat. In addition, the national Capitol, currently placed in Koror (a group of small islands off the southern coast of Babeldaob), will be relocated to Babeldaob by 2007.

The combined completion of the Compact Road and the relocation of the national capitol will lead to what many expect to be significant environmental and demographic changes. Already, large development projects have been proposed for Babeldaob that include a free trade zone, mega-resorts, golf courses, and numerous quarries and dredge sites. No comprehensive land use planning has taken place yet in Palau, however most States and the national government leadership consider competent land-use planning to be critical at this time. Previous efforts to initiate land use planning were initiated by State and National governments with limited participation from communities. While they did lead to the development of land use constraint maps, these efforts did not lead successfully to full competent land use planning.

Palau is ingrained with a traditional sense of conservation, enforced by chiefs and practiced by all traditional residents. Even in today's modern, fast-paced, multi-sectoral culture, conservation remains important, and communities in general remain committed to balancing their development needs with maintaining a sustainable resource base. A variety of protected areas have been established and are being managed by communities and states, with some national support, as a strategy for ensuring sustainable use of biodiversity and resources. To date there are 30 protected areas established and an additional 8 have been proposed. About 17% of Palau's terrestrial areas and 20% of Palau's near-shore marine areas are currently sustainably managed through some kind of protected area status. The community-driven and national momentum towards conservation and sustainable development has led Palau to set two major conservation goals. The first major goal is the establishment of a national Protected Areas Network (PAN), for which legislation was passed in 2003 to establish a framework. The second goal is the effective conservation of 20% terrestrial areas and 30% near-shore marine areas of Palau, which has in turn led to other Micronesia nations making similar commitments, now known internationally as the "Micronesian Challenge".

It is widely recognized that communities have the desire to protect their resources, but lack many of the specific skills, tools and information to do so. Over the past decade, the Palau Conservation Society (PCS) has worked to link communities with many of the technical skills, tools and information they need to manage resources and biodiversity sustainably. Education and awareness, along with capacity-building, activities have played a major role, and it is fair to say that most communities in Palau are now aware of the benefits of well-planned development that include planning for conserving important habitats and ecosystem functions. It is further commonly noted that land-use planning and the effective design, implementation and management of the Palau PAN will be mutually important. National efforts to gain the resources needed to both undertake land-use planning and to effectively implement a well-designed PAN are ongoing and fervent. Both are expected to be well underway by 2008. In addition, the nation has recently begun working towards developing a National Sustainable Development Strategy, a national level action that was called for by Small Island Developing States (SIDS) during the International Meeting to Review the Barbados Program of Action (BPOA) held in Mauritius in 2005.

The importance of community participation and vision in national planning processes has been widely recognized. The Palau Conservation Society has implemented numerous programs that build on existing community awareness and assist with the effective planning and implementation of conservation areas and resource-use planning initiatives, *at the community level*. Over the last three years, these programs have included a community visioning initiative. Community visioning has been recognized as a potential model for island communities around the world to play an active role in land use planning as well as other national planning processes.

Community Visioning Initiative

The Palau Community Visioning Initiative is aimed at empowering communities, at the grassroots level, to actively participate in making decisions about their future and their lands. The initiative brings together community members from across the broad range of sectors to discuss and agree on a common vision for the development of their community, based on common core values. These discussions take place in the form of community focus groups, community meetings, and individual discussions with state, traditional and opinion leaders. Community visioning in Palau has begun with identifying and training a pool of community facilitators. These facilitators, with occasional support from community facilitators from neighboring communities and PCS staff, then facilitate community members through a process of identifying common core values, aspirations and fears, which eventually form the basis for a community's vision statement.

The initiative uses innovative methods to catalyze ideas and dialogue, engage communities in the process of decision-making and strategically plan for the future. One example is the development of community vision photo-murals – an activity that was inspired by the Molokai and Oahu experiences. In two Palauan communities, cameras were distributed to 50 families each who were asked to photograph images of characteristics of their community that they love and are not willing to accept losing. Families were also asked to capture images of elements of their communities that they would like to improve. These photos were then used to build community vision photomurals to visually capture a peek into each respective community's vision. While innovative, the methods used are also linked to traditional socio-cultural protocols and practices. In many cases, contemporary facilitation methods and tools (such as ground rules, brainstorming and clustering, flip-charts and PowerPoint presentations) are forgone and instead replaced by, or synergized with, traditional approaches to facilitation and discussion. The community visioning process tends to synergize well with the traditional decision-making process whereby traditional leaders articulate decisions that have been made through extensive community consultation and often through consensus.

Tools and benchmarks such as land-use planning and zoning, marine resource use planning and conservation areas, and specific projects (such as community cultural centers, eco-trails, aqua-culture projects, etc.) then become part of a community strategic plan for moving toward a common vision. Activities in Palau so far have focused on building awareness, understanding and support for the community visioning concepts and process, training of community-based facilitators to guide communities through the process, and the formal establishment of Community Visioning core-groups representing all sectors of each community. To date, Communities throughout Palau are coming together to share ideas and decide on common values, in every area of life (including environment, development, education, economy, etc.). Together, they are working to formulate long-term goals, based on shared values, which serve as the actual community vision statement. While PCS has supported the process, the actual formation of the vision statements are being

facilitated by the facilitators who are based in each community and have been trained in group management, conflict resolution, brainstorming, and other planning methods.

The Process

The Community Visioning process is much like any other strategic planning process. It can be extremely tedious and challenging at times and requires enthusiastic and committed individuals to drive the process. The process in Palau has also required commitment from every level (local, state and national) and sector of society.

The concept of Community Visioning was introduced to Palau in 2001, after the Palau Association of Governors visited Hawaii for a leadership meeting and was introduced to the process. At that time the Chairman of the Association was very supportive of community visioning and a national workshop was implemented to acquaint Palau with a community visioning process that was successfully implemented on the islands Molokai and Oahu. The Molokai and Oahu experience inspired many individuals in Palau to take steps to move community visioning forward. For about one year following, the process was pursued by various groups and states in Palau. Unfortunately however, although generally supported by community members and leaders, community visioning in Palau waned after changes in state leadership, mainly because no one was specifically tasked and supported to carry the process forward. In late 2003, the Palau Conservation Society, in Partnership with UNESCO Small Islands' Voice, picked up the process and identified staff specifically tasked to coordinate the Community Visioning Initiative. Since then, the initiative has attracted interest and support from other partners as well, including Mobil Oil Micronesia, who now helps to sponsor the implementation of the Community Visioning Initiative in Palau.

Developing the vision statement is just the first step in the community visioning process. The next step involves conducting a community assessment to collect needed information about natural and socio-economic environments, and also determine strengths and challenges facing each respective community. The community assessment process helps communities decide on what their needs are and gain perspective on the difference between their community's true long-term aspirations and temporary desires that are often driven by outside influences.

The third step of the process is Strategic Planning, whereby communities set objectives for development and benchmarks for success. They also develop specific action plans and projects needed to achieve their visions.

The final and most important step will be the implementation of Community Strategic plans for which PCS is working with partners to investigate opportunities to assist communities and states with the implementation of their strategic plans. One example of an opportunity to assist communities is presented through the Global Environmental Fund Small Grants Program (GEF SGP) which provides small grants of up to \$50,000 to community based organizations for the implementation of projects that lead to environmental stewardship, community empowerment and poverty alleviation. Community visioning has been identified in the *GEF SGP Palau Country Program Strategy* as an important foundation and starting point for planning and implementing successful community-based projects.

Other opportunities are also available, however, a key obstacle to accessing these opportunities has been the capacity at the community level to take ideas and turn them into clear and attractive project proposals, and then to implement, manage and report on projects effectively. As a result of this

realization, PCS has begun to implement a series of workshops on project proposal development, management and reporting (both programmatic and financial). These workshops are targeted specifically at community-based organizations (CBOs) and are being implemented to complement the visioning process. CBOs and their project ideas are linked directly to funding opportunities and each participant leaves the workshops with a proposal in hand (that they themselves have written) and a funding opportunity to which to submit it. If their projects are successfully supported, CBOs will also be mentored in project management and reporting throughout project implementation.

Lessons

Community visioning (CV) continues to be a learning tool and process for everyone involved. It is very important to adapt this kind of a process to the local needs and contexts. Therefore, throughout the CV process we are constantly learning, adapting and learning more. While there are many still to be learned, lessons thus far from the Palau experience include:

1. A "Champion (s)" for the process is essential. An effective CV process needs strong, optimistic, and consistent support to coordinators, community facilitators and core-groups, as well as a respected "voice" and "face" for the process.
2. The process is best driven internally – through core groups of community facilitators. The CV process can seem overwhelming and tedious. It is most effective when it is introduced to leaders and promoted by community members themselves. It is best to have a team of community members who can support one another in the facilitation and communications activities. This core group then forms the internal driving force for the process.
3. Everyone involved in coordination and facilitation of the process needs to be on the same page. In order for the CV process to proceed smoothly and effectively, there needs to be clarity and agreement on the process from all coordinators, facilitators and core-group members.
4. Get "blessings" from key leaders and open participation to everyone as soon as possible. In order for the process to be accepted and implemented, there is the need to get the approval or "blessings" of key state and traditional leaders. All community sectors and levels of leadership (traditional, state, and national) need to be involved as soon as possible.
5. Go with the community's pace and momentum. In order for the CV process to be truly community driven, there is the need to recognize the community's own pace and priorities and not to force the timing of the CV process. Patience is essential.
6. Synergize with community's existing processes and planning. Communities are more and more often feeling overwhelmed with the plethora of programs, projects and planning initiatives in which they are asked to participate. To prevent the CV process from becoming perceived as more of a burden than an opportunity, there is the need to synergize the process with traditional governance and practices as well as ongoing community planning activities (such as state master-planning, national sustainable development strategies, conservation areas planning, etc.)

Some positive outcomes to date have included:

1. A national "buzz" about the importance of having a common vision seems to have emerged. National and state leaders are emphasizing the need for "vision" and are utilizing concepts from the community visioning process more and more often. The concepts are being used more often in community and leadership dialogues, such as those currently underway to

discuss land use and the possibility of amending the national laws and constitution to allow for 99-year leases of public and private lands.

2. Communities and states are proactively requesting the community visioning process as a foundation and a way forward for land-use planning, planning for conservation areas and state master-planning.
3. Core groups of community facilitators have been formally established in communities and states, which has led to significantly increased community-based skills in group facilitation and collaboration. These groups are often established through state resolution and therefore have the sanction of their state leadership to move forward.

Conclusion

Palau, home to a globally unique and important natural environment as well as to communities steeped in cultural richness and growing diversity, is at a critical cross-road in its national development. There is no shortage of national and state plans in Palau. There are many plans that have been developed over the last decade with the intention of guiding our nation's development. The vast majority of these plans are not effectively used, implemented or even revisited for revisions. All of these plans have been developed at a great expense to Palau's communities and their partners, but with very limited community participation. External consultants are often contracted at significant sums to develop these plans according to very restricted time frames that may or may not meet the communities' needs.

Although there are a variety of national and state plans, Palau has yet to undergo competent land-use planning. With the great changes expected in the near and long term future as a result of the completion of the Compact Road and the relocation of the National Capitol, combined with the goals of the Palau PAN and the Micronesia Challenge, it is particularly important that Palau ensures competent land-use planning that is grounded in an agreed national, but community-driven, vision. All communities in Palau are committed to wise planning and sustainability. Community visioning presents the opportunity for all community members and sectors to agree to a common vision for their community and nation, based on common core values.

The hope for the community visioning process is that it will provide each community member in Palau with the opportunity to link their personal core values and visions for their family and community with that of their state and nation. It is hoped that at the end of the day the Republic of Palau will be implementing plans for sustainable development at the community through national levels that are not driven externally, but driven by the people and communities of Palau. In the development process, our vision is the destination, our leaders are our steersmen and our communities are the navigators, each ideally equipped with a strategy or plan that everyone has agreed to and that serves as a map towards reaching our vision – our destination.