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Community Visioning: A strategy for Sustainable Island Living?

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Abstract

Most well-renown for its spectacular marine environment, Palau also shelters the largest pristine and most diverse forests in Micronesia. An estimated 80% of Palau's big island of Babeldaob (also Micronesia's second largest island) is covered in native forest, including upland, mangrove, swamp, limestone, Rock Island, agro-forest, plantation and palm forest. Both the marine and terrestrial environments of Palau provide habitat for a high number and diversity of plant and animal life, a large percentage of which is endemic to Palau.

The total population of Palau is roughly 20,000 with the majority (about 14,000) indigenous Palauans. Traditionally and politically, Palau is made up of 16 states. Currently there are three levels of formal governance – traditional, national and state. The national governance structure is modelled from the U.S. government and each state's governance structure includes traditional leadership, a Governor and state legislature. After more than a century of foreign rule, Palau achieved sovereignty, as well as membership to the United Nations, in the mid-1990s after entering into a Compact of Free Association (COFA) with the United States. Since then, development in Palau has significantly increased, as has the population of foreign guest-workers. Development and severe demographic changes are expected with the completion (by 2007) of a 52-mile circumferential road on the island of Babeldaob, also the largest development project in the history of Micronesia. To date, no comprehensive land-use planning has taken place, for Babeldaob or anywhere in Palau. Currently, there is general agreement at all levels in Palau (traditional, state and national) that comprehensive and effective land-use planning are high national priorities.

Previous efforts were made to initiate land use planning by State and National governments, with limited participation from communities. While these efforts did lead to the development of land use constraint maps, they did not lead successfully to effective land-use planning.

Palauan culture and traditional systems are ingrained with a conservation ethic, enforced by chiefs and practiced by 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.

While it is widely recognized that communities are generally aware and have the desire to protect their resources, they also often lack many of the specific tools to do so.

Inspired by the community visioning initiatives undertaken in Honolulu and Molokai, Palau's 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. Tools and benchmarks such as land-use planning and zoning, marine resource-use planning and conservation areas then become part of a community strategic plan for moving toward a common vision.

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 forward. A variety of lessons have already been learned from the first 4 years of implementation and include :

1. The need to engage all community sectors and levels of leadership (traditional, state, national) at all stages of the process.
2. The need to synergize the process with traditional governance and practices as well as with ongoing community planning activities.
3. The need for strong, optimistic, and consistent support to coordinators, community facilitators and core-groups
4. The need for clarity and agreement on the process from all coordinators, facilitators and core-group members. Everyone involved in coordination and facilitation of the process needs to be on the same page.
5. The need to be flexible and adaptive.