



# Environmental governance and Civic Engagement : Key Ingredients for Sustainable Community Development in Island Provinces

*Muthusami Kumaran, Ph.D.*

Assistant Professor, Department of Family, Youth & Community Sciences,  
University of Florida, USA

“Sustainable development is development which meets the needs of current generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”

*The World Commission on Environment & Development, 1987*

## **Abstract**

Sustainable community development has become a cornerstone for the overall sustainability movement in the recent years. Island provinces, due to the unique make up of their communities can and should adopt sound community development process for sustaining their futures growth. Civic engagement and citizen input are crucial for planning sustainable growth of island communities. This is primarily due to the fact that most island communities are inundated with rapidly growing tourism industry that threatens to affect the future of their environmental assets, island cultures and living standards.

The purpose of this article is to highlight the importance of environmental governance and citizen participation for sustainable growth of island communities. In addition to discussing the importance of citizen participation in sustainable development of island communities, this article also provides a brief case study of Jeju island and its recent attempts to promote sustainability in the wake of rapidly growing tourist industry. Two emerging and important planning processes that can enhance sustainable community development of island provinces are also discussed with specific applications to Jeju

**Key words:** Sustainable development, civic engagement, environmental governance, island communities.

## Introduction

Environmental degradation and the impending climate change are among the major factors that threaten sustainable growth of coastal communities around the world. Island communities, especially those in island provinces or states, have personal stakes in sustaining their cultures and distinctive island life styles in so many ways. Most of the island provinces are tourist destinations that partially or entirely depend on tourism economies. The unfortunate reality is that growing tourism industries almost always result in depletion of once abundant natural resources – such as forests, pristine mountains, and shorelines – at alarming rates.

Jeju island is an island province gifted with natural wonders and communities with rich traditions.. Further, Jeju has the unique designation of being a Special Self-Governing province with numerous opportunities to determine its own sustainable future. Jeju has hosted about 12 million tourists last year. In a true sense, the people of Jeju hosted these guests to their island. While the tourism industry facilitated (air & domestic transportation, hotels, restaurants, shopping, etc.) visits of the tourists of Jeju and greatly benefited from that enterprise, very little benefits have actually reached the communities and citizens of Jeju. In order to improve the natural value of Jeju and to promote its sustainable development, it is vital that the citizens of Jeju be consulted in devising policies and programs. Civic engagement and community input need to be embraced by the Jeju Special Self-governing Province in its planning process. This is especially true for a vision of "cleanness and coexistence." Further, NGOs and other civic groups of Jeju need to actively promote citizen participation in environmental governance and sustainable community development planning and implementation.

This article highlights some positive attempts by Jeju government, people, and NGOs in attaining participatory approach to community development. The article also highlights few necessary processes by which island provinces can benefit in their sustainable community development processes.

## Sustainable Coastal and Island Community Development

Island communities across the world have several unique and common characteristics with regard to their social and cultural values, environmental features, and distinctive lifestyles. Sustainable development is the process that anchors three vital elements of the planet, the people and the profit. Conserving the natural environments of the islands, protecting their citizen's cultures and values, all within the focus of mobilizing tourism and other economic growth are vital components of sustainable development. However, in reality many island communities struggle to balance these three elements of sustainability. They are often characterized by one of these three elements of profit dominating and often overriding the other two elements, resulting in resentment among community residents regarding deteriorating environment and their value systems. This also results in serious divides that pit communities against tourism industry and at times the local governments that support them. All these further erode true spirit of island community development. In order to reverse this situation, communities need to come together through a participatory approach for identifying and implementing local solutions, promoting community 'ownership' in environmental decisions, and in enhancing overall environmental governance where public, private, NGO, and community representatives deliberate on issues and barriers to sustainable local growth .

The major issue that prevents island provinces, especially island provinces that are tourist destinations, from coherent community development is the tension between community residents, civic groups, environmental NGOs, local governments, provincial governments, and the corporate sector that invests in tourism industry. Lack of environmental governance usually causes these tensions, because each of these entities has different perspectives and expectations on how to develop the islands for their benefits. Community residents like to continue their cultural values and island lifestyles. Environmental groups focus on conserving nature and preventing environmental degradation, primarily due to rapid growth of tourism. Local and provincial governments attempt to promote the local economy through increased tourism. And the corporate sector continues to invest on tourism development for expanding its profits. Due to the nature of each stakeholder's motivation, environmental governance tends to become weak with lack of trust among them and decline in genuine participation for sustainable growth.

Island environmental governance should be facilitated either by local governments or key NGOs to increase community residents' participation. This is because community residents seldom have deliberative conversations on their own about environmental future of their islands (Mathews, 2002). The organization or group that facilitates environmental governance must assist communities in naming issues that they are facing, framing them with multiple options, and bring—together all stakeholders in deliberating on the right approach to community development that benefits everyone within the sustainability frame work.

## **Civic Engagement and Community Mobilization for Sustainable Future**

As mentioned earlier, citizens' participation in island communities is the bedrock of overall sustainable community development. When various stakeholders, especially community residents, come together to discuss the future that is important to them, and to resolve issues that prevent them from attaining sustainable development, effective and collective decisions can be made. The unfortunate reality in many island provinces is that, decisions are made on a top-down fashion by governments and/or multi-national tourism corporations. As a result of these, community input in the development process declines or becomes stagnant.

Active engagement of citizens in local planning efforts, zoning process, and environmental decision making have proven to be very successful in addressing sustainable community development in islands. Jeju, the only island province of South Korea is bestowed with numerous natural beauties and unique culture of its people. However, in recent years Jeju's tourism has rapidly grown, resulting in unbalanced economic benefits for communities. Resentment among local communities about this imbalance where tourism industries gains a lot and very little of the economic development benefits the community seems to grow steadily. It is high time that citizens of Jeju come together to address some of the pressing problems.

The belief that communities can and should play an important role in their social, economic, and environmental development is the impetus for the overall community development process (Eversole, 2015). However, often communities cannot decide on the right path toward their sustainable future due to differing views, value systems and socio-economic conditions. With competing interests of stakeholders within and outside the community, deliberation and negotiation are necessary to overcome barriers to collective action (Kingston, 2012). Another important consideration in island community development is that community subgroups within a larger island

community are different in their cultural, socio, economic, and other characteristics. These diverse characteristics make them to adopt development process in varying degrees over various periods of time. A strength of community participation towards overall growth is that communities that are disadvantaged or in distress can mobilize support and resources to address their prevailing issues through the process. .

## **Jeju Government's Efforts in Incorporating Community Input in the Development Process**

Realizing the importance of community and citizens input in the overall sustainability framework of Jeju island, Jeju government has recently began to reach out to them. One such effort was held on October 25, 2015 in the form of 2015 Jeju Citizens Roundtable Discussion for the Environment. Organized by the Environmental Policy Division of the Jeju Special Self-Governing Province, the event hosted about 50 participants representing various community groups, NGOs, and concerned citizens. Prior to this event, the Environmental Policy Division had conducted a preliminary survey of about 100 community residents regarding their opinions on the future of Jeju's environment. The survey had both structured multiple choice questions and open ended questions to elicit respondents' opinions on various aspects of Jeju's sustainability. The survey results were highlighted during the Citizens Roundtable Discussion in order to frame the broad themes on Jeju's environment. These highlights include:

- About half of the survey respondents expressed that (so far) well-preserved pristine natural environments of Jeju such as gotjawal forests and marsh lands form the core value of the nature of Jeju.
- About 40% of the respondents pointed that reckless developments near beaches and in mid-mountain areas are the biggest problems against enhancing the nature value of Jeju. They were particularly critical of the burgeoning tourism industry and new hotels that are being built near Jeju's key natural assets.
- About 50% were of the opinion that increasing citizens' awareness and setting appropriate policy and regulatory frameworks to conserve the environmental are necessary steps to enhance the nature value of Jeju.
- About 50% of the respondents expressed that consensus among community groups, Jeju government, and citizens are vital to promote Jeju as an environmental hub.

As reflected in this survey, Jeju's environmental governance and sustainable community development need to be improved to a considerable extent with inputs from various stakeholders taken seriously. Citizens' concerns regarding uncontrolled development are very real at present, and if continued, will make negative impacts on Jeju's natural values and the island's environmental governance process.

The Roundtable Discussion also coincided with the meeting of Jeju Governor's Global Environmental Advisory Group. The 12 members of the Group also present at the workshop and had direct engagement with the participants and encouraged both Jeju government and citizens to actively seek community input in sustainable development planning.

Citizens Roundtable Discussion had two broad themes of (1) diagnosis on environmental problems in Jeju, and (2) ways to improve the nature value of Jeju. Discussants actively

participated and shared their opinions with their fellow members. The Governor of Jeju also attended the Roundtable Discussions, Governor's presence highlighted the desire of Jeju government to engage with people in decision making process.

It was evident that there is high level of interest from the representative residents, and their passion in the sustainable growth of Jeju. Indeed, there were difference of opinions expressed during the Roundtable Discussion, but they were within the decorum of civility, and discussed in an open and honest manner. This is an evidence that if conducted on a large scale basis in town hall format, Jeju citizens will show utmost interests in participating in the decision making process of the islands sustainable future. This Roundtable Discussion with selected citizens of Jeju and representatives of NGOs on the theme of "what should be done to improve the nature value of Jeju" is the right step in that direction. However, this is just the beginning to gain their trust in the process. Jeju government should continue to gain community and NGO input through various methods including town hall type meetings, discussions, and other participatory platforms.

### **Role of NGOs in Promoting Civic Engagement:**

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), especially the home-grown and grassroots NGOs can play vital roles in energizing and mobilizing community residents and groups for civic engagement and citizen participation in the development planning process. Through their missions and expertise on addressing various community issues, and their abilities to network with community residents, they can increase overall community awareness and knowledge on issues and their possible solutions. They can link community residents with elected officials of local and provincial governments through advocacy. They also play the watch dog role of identifying corporate groups (such as tourism industry), when their uncontrolled development negatively affects island community's culture, environment, and socio-economic status. Due to their status as independent organizations outside the government and corporate sectors, NGOs can facilitate all stakeholders in the overall community development process. However, they also tend to alienate some stakeholders due to lack of facilitative skills.

Jeju has a vibrant environmental NGO sector with missions to conserve the natural environment of the Island in the wake of the burgeoning tourist influx. These NGOs are closer to the people through their grassroots connections. Fortunately, Jeju's steadily growing NGO sector has been attempting to promote citizen participation and civic engagement for the island's future. One such organization is the Jeju Solidarity for Participatory Self-Government and Environmental Preservation. With the three principles of participation of citizens, people-centered development, and sustainable environmental protection, this NGO focuses on enhancing people-centered development and community driven sustainable environmental protection. Over the past ten years, the organization has promoted citizen's participation and perspectives that aim to promote sustainable development. The organization proposes controlled growth of Jeju while conserving its environment.

The Executive Director of Jeju Solidarity for Participatory Self-Government and Environmental Preservation provided the following perspective of the organization regarding the sustainable growth of the island: "Jeju, is the island province frequented by 12 million tourists, but more than 50% of the income generated by tourism does not stay in Jeju. The effort to increase the sheer number of tourists promises a "cheap tour" and has become the biggest hurdle in making Jeju a high value tourist destination that promotes its environment. Our organization has demanded that

the local government reduce the number of tourists in Jeju in order to preserve the environmental value on a continual basis. One of the ways to achieve this is to appropriately control the tour infrastructure. Another way to serve our goal is levy environmental taxes on Jeju tourists. While Jeju is claiming that it should seek to become a “global environmental city by the year 2020”, it proposes to depend on its environment taxes to execute it. From my point of view, these “green taxes” need to be used for improving the Jeju environment and communities. I plan to suggest such a policy direction, using various routes available in the local government and the National Assembly. At the same time, we have to inform Jeju residents of the problems lurking in their surroundings with the projected enlarged numbers of tourists ahead.” This opinion of a respected local NGO leader captures the general believes of environmental advocacy groups.

The next sections highlight two important and emerging planning processes of visioning and strategic planning that island provinces can follow towards sustainable community development. These sections also attempt to conceptually apply the two planning processes in the context of Jeju.

## Community Visioning for Sustainable Growth

Collective or group visioning is a key element of sustainable community building and development. A vision is defined as a representation of “an image of the future that articulates the values, purpose, and identities of [community members].” A vision can also be described as “a set of beliefs about how followers [members] should act, and interact, to realize an idealized future state” (Strange & Mumford, 2005). A collective, clear community vision can be a powerful tool for increasing the community’s capacity and driving it towards sustained growth by encouraging members to envision a realistic yet attractive future. The process of developing this vision often varies widely but community members’ buy in and commitment are crucial (Martin, McCormack, Fitzsimons, & Spirig, 2014).

The process of developing a community vision is a creative, time-consuming, and non-linear process. Some describe the process as a cognitive approach, utilizing key evidence and past history, whereas others describe it as a more intuitive approach, citing situational and organic growth. Prominent hindering factors for community visioning include time constraints, close-mindedness, and lack of inspiration or energy among stakeholders, as well as barriers to incorporating the vision into practice (Hines, 2001). Overall, visioning is a dynamic process that demands key leader support and the ability to encourage and inspire others to be committed to the visioning process. In order to be successful, community visioning also should embrace inputs from multiple sectors including public and private sectors.

Ideal community visioning process for Jeju should capitalize on the island’s natural, cultural, and social assets; capitalize community development opportunities based on collective decision and values; and emphasize the continuous involvement of citizens in the overall development process. As mentioned above, community visioning for Jeju should also have inputs from government and corporate (especially the tourism industry) sectors in order to build consensus on identifying and addressing issues that prevent them in working with community groups and NGOs.

## Participatory Strategic Planning for Sustainable Communities

Some of the most successful community development planning in the recent years have followed

the more intense form of strategic planning. In order for a community to embark on a strategic planning process, there should be high levels of participation and buy-in from entire communities because it is a system wide process. Unlike visioning, strategic planning is more specific in that it focusses on certain goals for the community within a stipulated time frame (usually 3 – 5 years), it requires residents aware of all their community resources, and incorporate both into a responsive and dynamic environment. There are three key ingredients for successful strategic planning: a definite purpose, clear understanding on the environment (political, social, economic, etc.), and the community's creativity in developing responses.

Community strategic planning begins with clarification on history, values, and current issues in light of changing external factors. In the next step, community residents and organizations assess their strengths (such as the social capital, island cultures, collective desire to conserve environment, etc.), weaknesses (local issues, uncontrolled growth that threatens environment and island lifestyle, lack of assistance from government, etc.), opportunities (active civic engagement, grassroots community mobilization, networking of local NGOs, etc.) and threats (lack of citizen participation, mistrust between community residents, governments, and tourism industry, etc.). This SWOT analysis helps the community to identify specific strategic issues that prevent from sustainable growth. Based on these strategic issues, community responses need to be devised with specific goals, objectives, task sequence, and adequate resources.

If carried out systematically, a community strategic plan can stimulate ingenuity and new approaches for participatory sustainable development, clarify the community's values and beliefs, establish a collective vision, increase all community residents' involvement, and provide a framework for ongoing decision making which also engages public and private sectors. Island communities are immune to impending threats of climate change and environmental degradation. Planning their future strategically will help them in addressing current and expected issues by building on their existing strengths and available opportunities.

Jeju's environmental and civic NGOs are growing in their activism and programs. However, they are fragmented with limited networking opportunities. Strategic community planning can align their missions and programs towards broad strategic goals for common success and networking. They can also assist these NGOs in mobilizing scarce financial, organizational and volunteer resources for collaborative success. Further, involvement of all key stakeholders including the government and corporate sectors will promote cooperation among them in the overall strategic sustainability framework.

## Conclusion and Future Directions

Jeju island and other island provinces around the world are blessed with so many natural assets, vibrant island cultures, and hospitable communities that are willing to share their island homes with visitors. However, uncontrolled tourist influx and over dependency on tourism economy have eroded the natural elements of these islands and placed unacceptable levels of stress on the socio-cultural aspects of residents. Island community residents certainly have their rights for self-determination on the future of their island homes, In spite of the tourism and other infrastructural development that are beyond their control, they should constantly strive to sustain the natural and cultural elements of their islands for future and unborn generations. The best way they can achieve such sustainability is through active participation in environmental governance and community development decision making.

In addition to people of islands, local and provincial governments that have jurisdictions over them need to engage communities in the collective decision making process for sustainable growth. In the case of Jeju, although Jeju government has reached out to a small group of residents in the recent Roundtable Discussion, it should build-upon the trust that was created by the Discussion. It should initiate a larger survey to gauge opinions of wider audience, and there should be a series of town hall type meetings to encourage citizens to participate in the environmental governance and a common vision of the sustained development of Jeju island.

Community-based NGOs, due to their mission-focused nature of improving the overall life standards of communities they serve, are in a position to facilitate participation of various stakeholders including community leaders, residents, local government officials, and representatives of the tourism industry to increase understanding of and desire to address local issues that prevents the overall sustainable growth of island communities. Environmental NGOs and civil groups of island communities have ethical and moral responsibilities to promote citizen participation in development process due to the fact that people need to be aware of the external dynamics that alter their environment and way of life. NGOs need to be in the forefront of facilitating the citizens' participatory process in sustainable development. Jeju has a vibrant and growing NGO sector that is already making headway in the movement to promote civic engagement and citizen participation for overall sustainability of the island. Academic institutions, especially Jeju National University, should also be in the fore front in the overall process of environmental governance.

Sustaining the natural, cultural and social aspects of island provinces with long history of harmonious living with nature is a collective process with a multitude of stakeholders at the citizens, government, NGO, and corporate levels. When they all work together towards the triple bottom line of sustainability namely the planet, the people, and the profit, island environments and cultures can thrive with sustainable future.

## References

- Eversole, R. (2015). *Knowledge Partnering for Community Development*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Hines, A. (2001). *Using Visioning in a Comprehensive Planning Process*. Retrieved on December 14, 2015 from: [https://www.uwsp.edu/cnr-ap/clue/Documents/publicProcesses/Using\\_Visioning\\_in\\_Comprehensive\\_Planning\\_Process.pdf](https://www.uwsp.edu/cnr-ap/clue/Documents/publicProcesses/Using_Visioning_in_Comprehensive_Planning_Process.pdf)
- Jeju Special Self-Governing Province Environmental Policy Division. (2015). *What Should be Done to Improve the Nature Value of Jeju? Report for the 2015 Jeju Roundtable Discussion for the Environment*.
- Kingston, R. J. (ed.) (2012). *Citizens, Deliberation, and the Practice of Democracy*. Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation Press.
- Mathews, D. (2002). *For Communities to Work*. Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation Press.
- Martin, J.S., McCormack, B., Fitzsimons, D., & Spirig, R. (2014). Evaluation of leadership practices: How to develop a vision. *Journal of Research in Nursing*, 19(2), 102–115.
- National Issues Forums Institute. (2012). *Sustaining Ourselves: How Can We Best Meet the Needs of Today and Tomorrow?* Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation Press.
- Strange, J.M. & Mumford, M.D. (2005). The origins of vision: Effects of reflection, models, and analysis. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 16(1), 121–148.