



Bridging Social and Environmental  
Sustainability: Instigating Solidarity Through an  
Eco-friendly Public Art

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## **BRIDGING SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY: INSTIGATING SOLIDARITY THROUGH AN ECO-FRIENDLY PUBLIC ART**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Although there is a plethora of what sustainability is, approaches tend to address its dimensions separately. This paper narrates a public art installation project which was done in collaboration with a local community. During the Christmas Season, a competition of Nativity Scene interpretations is held in Tarlac, a province in the Philippines. Financial resources can be critical especially for its municipalities that are dominated by agriculture, such as Victoria. Materials were selected from their natural environment and industries that apparently involve people with disabilities. Participation also extended to members inhabiting the bamboo forests, bamboo craftsmen, and school children. The diverse engagement resulted in participants showing concern for the community: volunteered to assist the pwds, suggested incorporating junk food foil from the community waste, and proposed events to extend the exhibit of the art components. This necessitates that recognizing community resources can reinforce connectedness, thereby bridging ecological integrity and social well-being, the elements of a sustainable community.

### **KEYWORDS**

environmental; social; sustainability; community development; engagement

### **INTRODUCTION**

Sustainability is a paradigm for thinking about the future in which environmental, societal, and economic considerations are balanced in the pursuit of an improved quality of life (UNESCO, 2015). The processes and pathways that are necessary to achieve this refer to the Sustainable Development Goals. According to the United Nations, these goals were established to address the global challenges of poverty, climate change, environmental degradation, peace, and justice (United Nations, n.d.-b). It serves as a roadmap in achieving a quality of life for the present and future generations, and that is by promoting prosperity while protecting the planet. Despite its pervasiveness and the massive popularity it has garnered over the years, the concept still seems unclear as many people continue to ask questions about its meaning and history, as well as what it entails and implies for development theory and practice (Mensah and Casadevall, 2019). The concept of sustainable development originally included a clear social mandate, for two decades the human dimension has been neglected amidst abbreviated references to sustainability that have focused on bio-physical environmental issues, or been subsumed within a discourse that conflated 'development' and 'economic growth' (Vallance *et al.*, 2011). Therefore, it cannot be understood as a well-performing environmental sustainability without a balanced society, offering a decent quality of life (Pareja-Eastaway, 2012). Correspondingly, social sustainability cannot be created simply through the physical design of the community but then neither can environmental sustainability be created by physical design alone (Ricee, 2021). After all, the concept of needs goes beyond simply material needs and includes values, relationships, freedom to think, act, and participate, all amounting to sustainable living, morally, and spiritually (Shah, 2008).

There is a plethora of how sustainability can be but approaches tend to frame its dimensions separately. Despite it has been clear that interaction of its dimensions influences the goals and targets established over time. Thus, strategies towards environmental and social sustainability must be simultaneous. With this, the succeeding section narrates an eco-friendly project of a community that resulted in concerns for other participants and the inauguration of events for the community. What will be discussed is not to conclude a single approach to satisfy sustainability because issues pertinent to sustainability can be distinct to a community. Rather, it aims to shed light on the significance of transforming communities into responsible stewards of the environment. Efficient utilization of resources will reveal competencies that eventually develop a sense of certainty. Having a sense of certainty motivates individuals to partake in the improvement of their community. Systems thinking—and an explicit focus on the interactions and relationships between nature and society—enables us to reconsider and transform development of all types in light of the sustainability imperative (Hembd and Silberstein, 2013).

### **THE BAMBOO ART INSTALLATION PROJECT OF VICTORIA**

The Philippines that is dominated by Roman Catholicism has various traditions during the Christmas Season. One of the prominent symbols relevant to this special event is the Nativity Scene, which is the Belen to Filipinos. With this, a festival that incorporates a competition of different Belen-making categories was established in 2007 by the Tarlac Heritage Foundation and Commission for the Cultural Heritage of the Church (Official Gazette of the Republic of the Philippines, 2011). This occurs every November in Tarlac, a province in the Philippines which consists of 1 city and 17 municipalities. Victoria, one of its municipalities, primary source of income is agriculture while manufacturing industries minimally operate within the locality (Municipality of Victoria Tarlac, n.d.). As financial resources are critical, natural and economic elements of the community were considered for the project.

- Bamboo that is naturally abundant in the locality was selected as the material for the formwork.
  - When the designer discussed that bamboo will be the main material for the installation, a community member suggested sourcing these from small villagers who inhabit the bamboo forests of the municipality. While local bamboo craftsmen were engaged to build the bamboo formwork.



**Figure 1:** Local craftsmen prepare the bamboo harvested by the small villagers residing in bamboo groves.



**Figure 2:** Craftsmen working on the bamboo formwork.

- Other materials were identified from the prevailing industries in Victoria.
  - Water hyacinth and macramé were used for the nativity scene. These prevailing industries employed people with disabilities. Upon knowing this, some participants started to volunteer to prepare the wooden frames where the water hyacinth and macramé will be installed. One participant suggested wrapping these frames with junk food foil from the community waste.



**Figure 3:** Other community members working on various parts of the art installation.

- The centerpiece is surrounded by artworks on canvases that are biodegradable.
  - School children were asked to create an artwork that describes what to them is the meaning of a Christmas of Victoria. These were lit to create a similar effect of stained glass seen in churches. A participant mentioned that perhaps it would be good to cover the artworks to protect them from the rain. Another proposed to exhibit the artworks when the installation is already dismantled.



**Figure 4:** Some artworks done by the school children.

Although the project was just temporary, it was followed by events for the community. The project was installed in front of the municipal hall which functions as a parking area. The base of the municipal hall's flag pole was used to hold the bamboo formwork in place, as suggested by an individual from the community. With this, there was adequate space to hold the first Christmas Market. When the installation was dismantled, the children's artworks were exhibited in a museum outside the municipality. An art workshop was also organized to further develop the talents of the community members.



**Figure 5:** The Bamboo Art Installation of Victoria.

## **DISCUSSION**

By utilizing the material assets of the community, an environment-friendly art installation was produced without compromising their resources, which can be better allocated for permanent and long-term projects. Participants were able to independently execute the project since the resources relate to their skill sets. Leading the interaction also resulted in an arbitrary reach of participants. Significantly, the project became a venue for the community to see the outcome of their capabilities when these have coalesced. Being confident with another participant ascertains that their contribution will not be wasted. Despite that the project did not receive any recognition, several individuals voiced their appreciation making them proud of being a Victorian. One even commented that “nothing is impossible when we are united” (Facebook - Taga Tarlac Ka Kung Facebook Page, 2019). The engagement demonstrated that unlocking community potential can instigate solidarity, as evident from the participants generating ideas that concern other community members. The concept of solidarity refers to people having obligations to each other – and in part to a sense of shared identity and commitment (Spicker, 2014). It can be challenging to unify heterogeneous individuals, although belonging to the same community. Additionally, 'what will be its advantage to them' can be a deciding factor if they should contribute or not. Hence, it is imperative to uncover practices that allow members to realize that their individual role is vital for their community to move forward. Groups are cohesive when they possess group level structural conditions that produce positive membership attitudes and behaviors and when group members' interpersonal interactions maintain these group level structural conditions (Mulunga and Yazdanifard, 2014).

## **CONCLUSION**

The social dimension of sustainability is based on the fact that equality and understanding of the interdependence of people within the community are the basic prerequisite for an acceptable quality of life, which is the first goal of development (Kokic *et al.*, 2016). And yet, much attention is given to approaches that focus on addressing environmental issues. The current COVID-19 pandemic has shown the effect of a lack of a holistic approach to sustainability. People are perceiving other individuals of their community as 'others', resulting in discrimination and feuding for resources. Competition between communities also exists as access to services and programs provided vary. The need to depend on other communities contribute to the severity of contagion. Hence, the pandemic is more than a health crisis but is also a human, economic and social crisis (United Nations, n.d.-a). This brings the significance of concrete strategies that coincide the environment with human values. Since collective action is necessary to address any crisis. The project discussed revealed that local resources can be a tool to reinforce connectedness. Because local resources are natural and economic elements, they can reveal what the community is capable of. The confidence it builds stimulates cooperation and solidarity. Thus, the proposed methodology is a pathway to making societies cohesive. Social cohesion contributes not only to the rate, but also to the quality and the sustainability of growth, especially in the context of sharp, frequent changes in external conditions (OECD, 2013). If strategies altogether accelerate climate action and human development, communities both their people and their environment are well-prepared for future shocks and unprecedented changes.

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### **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest associated with the work presented in this paper.

### **DATA AVAILABILITY**

1. All necessary data is presented in this paper.
2. Data on which this paper is based is available from the authors upon reasonable request.