Exploring resistance in rural and remote island communities

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to discuss and use living stories to provide examples and some basic principles of cooperation as the alternative way of organising island community.

Design/methodology/approach – This study draws upon autoethnography and storytelling to show co-operative practices. Storytelling is supported by deconstruction of living stories.

Findings – Island communities create and maintain resistance through a culture of cooperation. Living stories (I-V) illustrate different instances of cooperative practices, for example, friends in need, gathering, search and moba, and where sympathy, gift, and humanity and care are essential elements.

Research limitations/implications – It would be interesting to explore whether island communities elsewhere exhibit similar patterns.

Practical implications – Deconstructed stories helped in reconstructing the bigger picture of how the people on the island offer collective resistance by developing different ways of cooperation.

Social implications – Living stories (I-V) based on reciprocity of taking turns and giving back to the community, is a strategy for survival and of collective resistance within the rural island communities.

Originality/value – Appreciation of the true value of collective resistance based on gift and reciprocity rather than financialisation and economisation aids to better understanding of the needs of traditional societies of island archipelagos, on the part of policy makers and other stakeholders who are involved in the process of planning for island development.

Keywords Cooperation, Ethnography, Liminality, Storytelling, Authoethnography, Collective resistance, Rural island communities, Terrain, A communal friendship

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Rural and remote island communities face a fear of losing the local identity (Grydehøj, 2011) and of social exclusion (Mendas, 2015) due to geographical remoteness, weak transport links coupled with the costly ferry tickets and scarcity of subsidies. Yet, not all is lost and resistance on the part of the communities plays a key role in preserving the island identity (Mendas, 2014). Resistance could be broadly defined as: refusal to accept something new or different; effort made to stop or to fight against someone or something; or the ability to prevent something from having an effect (Resistance, n.d.). Since this interpretation does not automatically refer to resistance as destructive or antagonistic, it remains very open. A more specific interpretation of resistance can be found in natural science as the power or capacity of an organism to resist harmful influences from disease or to survive exposure to a toxic agent (Resistance, n.d.). In this sense, resistance is associated with protection against the external harm to the individual or collective. This interpretation is helpful in explaining the human actions and decisions that concern island communities in their remote natural environment where dependence on each other is a key to survival. More recently, resistance has been associated with the French résistance, an underground organisation of a conquered country that engage in sabotage and secret operations against occupation forces. This association has influenced

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contemporary debates on the relationship between the power (Foucault, 1978) that institutions exercise over groups and individuals who, in turn, confront this power through collective resistance represented by rebellions, riots, demonstrations, revolutions or civil wars. Scott (1985) discusses the concept of everyday resistance with the hidden transcripts of anger or disguised discourses of dignity against domination. Vinthagen *et al.* (2013) extend Scott's resistance as an activity in dynamic interaction with opposition to power. Bayat (2000) argues that everyday resistance occasionally shifts toward collective resistance to obtain certain gains in favour of, for example, impoverished communities. Forsberg and Stockenstrand (2014) investigate collective resistance to financialisation through distancing and persistence in organisational settings. This paper develops these themes, exploring the ways islanders create and maintain collective resistance through a culture of cooperation to preserve their island way of living and ensure their sustainability.

The island in this study is classified as a small island within an archipelago that consists of 17 populated islands. It has 33 permanent residents, mostly elderly, according to a recent census (Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). Younger members of the families work and live in the nearby port city and stay on the island at the weekends. During the summer months (June-August), the island is popular with tourists who rent properties while, in winter, it is left to the locals to enjoy it for themselves (Plate 1).

I became familiar with the island in 2007 when my family bought a property and, in 2010, while I lived there for five months, I was able to explore the community as well as other small islands in the archipelago. Broadly speaking, an island community is defined "as the system of relationships between persons and among groups or communities, with regard to the division of activity and the functional arrangement of mutual obligations within society, as well as the broad informal interrelationships within a society" (Resistance, n.d.). Story I illustrates this in practical terms.

Story I – island community

> During the exceptionally hot summers, with July and August temperature reaching 40°C, water is delivered by tanker according to booking arrangements between the islanders. I captured the event at a communal meeting that I attended. The theme of the communal meeting was *water*. The Chief's house was second on the right and when I entered it, suddenly there was silence. There were already five men there, turning their heads towards me and, then, towards the Chief. I greeted everyone. The Chief showed me to a chair. While the Chief was distributing drinks around the table, everybody returned to the main purpose of the meeting: to discuss the problem of the water supply. The islanders were discussing the date and who would be available on the island at that time as they needed to be organised to help with the delivery of the water to each house through the heavy water pipes that are linked to the water tanks situated under each house. The person who was in the charge of water

Source: © Zrinka Mendas (2014)

Plate 1.
Small island panorama

allocation and payment complained that some people did not want to pay for the previously agreed amounts of water and tried to negotiate to get more for less. The discussion started to escalate into a scene from a western movie, the noise was deafening, the atmosphere electric. Shouting is, as I came to learn, the norm in these meetings. Some islanders agreed while others were complaining. I was sitting and listening quietly to their conversation about the hot summer, the suffering olive trees and a shortage of water. I knew that the island had no mains water supply: each house has its own water tank situated below the house in which the rain water collects from the roof. The meeting lasted an hour and, eventually, an agreement was reached. Everyone has to write down how much water they want so that this information could be dispatched to the local council. In this way, no one could receive more than they asked for. The Chief was leading the discussion, giving advice to the others. Everybody respected him. After all, they were all members of the same communal group, whether they were family or newcomers, like my stepfather. At the end of the meeting, everyone started to leave to do their weekend odd jobs.

The story illustrates some of the characteristics of the island community: the presence of a structure of a culture, society or community with the focus on families and friends for the purpose of socialisation (Appelbaum and Chambliss, 1997). Socialisation is important and is exercised through the patterns of interactions within groups, which are visible through the organising of communal tasks, supporting members and attending communal meetings (Charon, 1986). The community tries to resolve urgent water supply issues at meetings in a local building used for different types of communal activities and without involving the local government officials. This practice bears similarity to Ostrom's (1990) work on *Governing the Commons* that studied how people can cooperatively manage common resources, such as fish stock, water and forests, without the need for government regulation or private ownership. Ostrom called it institutional cooperation or "polycentrism". Moreover, in the process of forming the social ties within the community (Putnam, 2000), members of the community choose to engage because they feel obligated to help while putting their differences aside. The obligation to assist becomes an inherent part of cooperative practice and is illustrated in Story II.

Story II – friends in need

It was one of those hot summer Sundays in August 2010. At 7am, I was standing on the house terrace that faces the newly built island ferry dock with a freshly made cup of coffee in my hands. Around the dock were piles of rubbish standing out in the sun. These were left by the contractor who had built the new ferry dock, just completed after two years of mining, drilling and underwater cementing. Someone had to clear it. The locals had avoided this for months, finding all sorts of excuses and complaining that this was the contractor's responsibility. In reality, no one wanted to do it. When the islanders realised that the contractor would not return and clear it, they finally agreed to take action. Around 10am, I saw a group of the locals approaching the dock. There were six of them. The ferry was due to dock soon, around 12am. The group devised a plan. They first had to clear the dock of rubbish and afterwards they would help each other to collect the cargo they expected from the ferry. You could see them approaching from 100m, armed with spades and bags and dressed in sun washed baggy clothes, and determined to do it right this time. This picturesque scene made me laugh. They reminded me of Dad's Army (a BBC TV series), *Friends in need*. How interesting. I began recalling all those individual conversations with them, when they had been full of hate for each other, spitting on each other, making drunken abusive remarks and playing bad jokes on each other. I asked myself a question: How, on earth, did we arrive at this point?

The words friends in need echoes with the self-governance of Ostrom (1990) and the story points to the presence of some kind of a cooperative practice among the islanders. They might choose not to participate, but then they risk alienation within the community itself and it is precisely this fear of alienation and need for reciprocity that drives the cooperative practices described in the Stories I and II. On a higher plain, both stories illustrate that island communities behave as a social organisation as well as the traditional human economy characterised by the non-monetary exchange of goods and service (Becker, 1976; Down, 1957) within the island space, with other islands, as well as between the island archipelago and the mainland. For the sake of simplicity, one can view island communities as a system with its own structure or as the collective of the individuals engaging in the economic activities of demand and supply for the goods and services within the island space, between island and other islands as well as between the island archipelago and hinterland. The paper focuses on the social relations in which island economic life is embedded (Granovetter and Swedberg, 1992) and considers the island community and its members as cooperative and cultural rather than simply economic agents, who engage for the overall benefit of their community in cooperative practices, as illustrated in the stories.

Methodology

This research draws upon autoethnography and upon storytelling. Doloriert and Sambrook (2012) argue for autoethnography as a contemporary approach to ethnography while Watson (2012) points to the need for "softening the boundaries" between organisations and society (Brannan *et al.*, 2007, 2012) in ethnographic studies. Ethnographic studies of the communities, for example, can be found in the community festival within the village (Lucas, 2014); rural community organising with the help of Rural Chamber of Commerce (Crawford and Branch, 2015) or gold mining practices in Johannesburg (Phakathi, 2013). Forsberg and Stockenstrand (2014) explore resistance to financialisation through distancing and persistence in organisational settings. Ethnographic studies of islands communities and their resistance can be found in Amoamo (2012) who argued that its culture facilitates cooperation and collectivity. Stephens (2010) studied local aboriginal communities' and their resistance in the form of the community's "toxic talk" to powerfully communicate and contextualise the devastating political, economic, social, and cultural impacts of pollution and environmental crises on indigenous communities.

In similar fashion, this study uses storytelling to show resistance through the living stories. Stories are narrated as living experiences, emotions and events as they happened and "work *lives* when it itself […] undergoes various changes as a result of variously formed concretizations" (Ingarden, 1973, p. 352). Storytelling is supported by deconstruction in Derrida's (2009, 2011) sense as tracing free play and meanings. "Deconstruction as a strategy tries to find the most surprising contradictions in texts, unravel them, and build on them" (Macksey and Donato, 1970, p. 254). Deconstructed Stories, I-V, illustrate how the islanders cooperate and provide different occasions for cooperation that build on the principle of, for example, turn taking but also risking one's life for others. In this way, stories provide a link to the development of analytical concepts associated with the cooperative practices among island communities more broadly.

Arendt (1987, 2003) argues that a society's members should bear a responsibility for carrying and passing on their values through storytelling. Stories, thus, represent the deeds of the past for the benefit of future generations. This is also true for island communities. The stories illustrate how the members affirm that they owe debts to each other. Islanders do not use inscriptions on paper to remember the debts but use stories

in order to remember each other, what they have done for each other and who has contributed to the commons. In this sense, storytelling becomes a part of the methodology of this study. Islanders each became a witness and a narrator; as in "behind the actor stands the storyteller, but behind the storyteller stands a community of memory" (Wolin, 1977, p. 97), and their stories become "pure experiences" of things as they really are (Arendt, 1983, p. 147).

Traces of resistance

This section provides further traces of resistance using stories (III-V). When I first visited, the islanders judged me as a complete stranger who has no knowledge of island life and their island culture. I started to explore the islands and ask islanders about their everyday problems. I found that island life can be solitary and harsh, especially for the elderly during the winters. Often, they have to rely on the younger generations and the local ferries' staff to deliver medicines and food. Yet, they seem to be full of pride and educate the younger generations about their island culture and life. Because they forsake the comfort of the city life, in many ways, I felt a sympathy toward their sacrifice for the community and culture (Smith, 1790). The notion of sympathy becomes relevant. Originating from Greek *sumpatheia,* its definition varies, for example, as: a feeling of pity and sorrow for someone else's misfortune; agreement and support in the form of shared feelings or opinions; a favourable attitude; relating harmoniously to something else; responding in a way similar or corresponding to an action elsewhere; or as a friendship and understanding between people who have similar opinions or interests (Sympathy, n.d.). The last interpretation appears to be the most convenient and below Story III illustrates in practical terms sympathy as an element of the cooperative practices within the island community.

Story III – Ladislav

In 2010, the storm named Ladislav caused the most destruction along the coastline in the last 40 years. Extensive damage was done to the coastal areas, including the destruction of roads and the flooding of houses. I was on the island at the time of the event. The storm raged for several days, causing major disruption to ferry services between the islands and the mainland. Residents, especially vulnerable elders, were unable to travel to the hospital or food market in the local port city. Story III is narrated as it happened:

> In the morning after the storm Ladislav, I was sitting on the veranda. The weather was suddenly very calm, the sea colour had changed to a pastel green and the sky had turned mildly blue. The view from the veranda was shocking. Debris lay everywhere around the harbour. Every day, early in the morning around 6am, I took the dog for a walk around the island. This time, the path along the sea was blocked in many places and completely destroyed by the storm. Big chunks of stones had been thrown ashore by the sea and were blocking the path. It would take days to remove them and rebuild the path. The path led to the last house standing on the far end of the island and normally it is two meters wide. Now in some places it was destroyed. I gave up walking any further and returned to the villa. While watching the harbour from the veranda, I saw a couple of residents approaching and turned to my mother: "Mother, I have to help with clearing the debris from the harbour; it is simply too much for a few people to do it. They need all the help they can get." My mother replied: "Why you? I am sure there are other people around. Let them do it themselves." I replied: "Well, I feel that I should help. At the moment, there are not many people on the island these days. The more people do it, the sooner they can finish with the clearing. So, I am going to get some

> old clothes […]" When I reached the harbour there were three people debating the tasks. Two of them were elderly, in their seventies, and one in his forties. I approached one of the elderly saying "I would like help, so where should I start from?" The elderly man turned to me in a cheerful voice: "Jolly good to see you here! We need to start straight away because the ferry will dock at 3pm, so that leaves us a few hours. So, you can start clearing the old dock where the catamaran usually docks". To my surprise, the spirit was high among the islanders, in contrast with the previous night, when people were worried about the foundations of their houses being blow away by the storm. I felt for them. They are poor people. I took a mop and started clearing. It took three hours to clear the surface around the ticket office and harbour. It was early afternoon when they cleared all the debris. I was standing on the dock when the catamaran arrived. While talking to its crew, the captain mentioned: "Well, you seem to have cleared all this debris quickly and efficiently. Other islands' harbours have still not done anything so the commuters have struggled to get across". One elderly person replied: "This is how things are done here".

In summarising the main points, I felt obliged to help and not only that but also sympathise with the islanders as a human being. I was also aware that my deeds were going to be judged favourably by the members of the island community, especially when one does good things for the community. Cooperative practices, as illustrated by the Stories I-III, are driven by the island community of hearers and transmitters of the deeds (Arendt, 1987, 2003). These deeds also become part of the cooperative practices of gifts and debts. According to economic anthropologists Marshall Sahlins, Karl Polanyi, Marcel Mauss and Maurice Godelier, the gift economy can be viewed as a system characterised with kinship-based reciprocity that holds together traditional societies. Mauss (1925) argues that to give a gift is to transfer something without any immediate return, or guarantee that there will ever be one and, thus, the term "gift economy" can apply to any not organised on market principles. Instead of transactions viewed as monetary exchanges, in gift economies, what matters is building healthy social relations between individuals or communities, such as creating friendships, working out rivalries and fulfilling obligations. The gift, in the form of reciprocity and turn taking is, therefore, something that effects social relations. Bellow Story IV provides a practical example.

Story IV – gathering

Every year, the anglers must pull their boats out of the sea in order to strip off the old paint and algae and repaint them. Fishing boats can range in size from a small vessel to much larger boats that can weigh up to 1.5 tonnes, in which case one needs to find 10-15 people. The locals pull the boat out of the sea and move it to the designated area, so the renovation work on the boat's hull can be carried out:

> It was Saturday morning, around 7am, when at breakfast my stepfather announced that pulling the boat out of the sea must take place today at 10am. We would have to pull the boat out of the water so the old blue antirust paint could be stripped off and then the algae deposits on the hull could be removed. After this, the boat will be left to dry overnight before it is repainted on Sunday. At 9.45am sharp, I was sitting on the ferry dock while my stepfather was preparing the boat and tools for towing. I waited and looked at my watch. It was 9.50am. But there is no one on the horizon. I turned to my stepfather and said "are you sure that they are coming?" He replied "Yes, do not worry. They will be here". Five minutes passed, still no one had approached the dock. I turned to my stepfather again, saying "No one is coming, it is 10am now" of that I am sure! He replied again "Wait until 10.05am". I began thinking, why are they not coming? They must come because my stepfather had helped them before. It would be very foolish of them not to come. Suddenly, I saw a line of people approaching, slowly, one by

> one. I turned to my stepfather, saying "So, here they are! Honestly, I really thought that no one would come". He replied "I told you so, have patience!" We both started laughing. The crowd got bigger and bigger. Around 20 people gathered out of nowhere. The job of pulling the boat out of the water could finally start. It was getting hotter, around 39C. Most of the men wore swimwear and some jumped into the sea straight away to cool off. Some waited for instructions. My stepfather started assembling them. First, the boat had to be tied to a rope connected to machines that would slowly pull the boat out of the sea. Five people went to one side of the boat and another five to the other. Together they held the boat across the thick wooden boards that lie in front of the boat. The idea is to hold the boat from both sides, making sure that it remains straight while being pulled out. With a lot of effort, plenty of shouting and frantic movements on the way at each step of towing, it took 20 minutes to pull the boat out. The first part of the mission was completed. The next stage involves stripping off the old paint, letting it dry and then repainting. The next day, they will have to put the boat back into the sea. On Sunday, at 5pm, the men gathered again and towed the boat back into the sea. The mission for this year was accomplished.

The story began with a dialogue between myself and my stepfather. Through the conversation, there is a period of silence between us: will anyone come? There is a feeling of uncertainty in the air and the possibility that no one would come, and a stubborn confidence, believing that someone would come. These are two traits well known to man: a worry on the part of the person who does not know the islanders well (myself); and the confidence of the person (my stepfather and an adopted local) who had been accepted by the islanders and who knew them well. Then the tempo of the process intensifies, the arrival of the islanders happens, the gathering is taking place. The story ends with a happy outcome: the boat was pulled out without any damage. What follows is a celebration of the success, the joy of helping and giving something back to the community. My stepfather summons everyone to his house for a glass of wine to thank them for coming. Gatherings, in this sense, captures cooperative practice called *moba*. *Moba* still exists in rural communities of Croatia. It signifies a mutual aid between individuals or families which, as this story shows, persists in rural parts, especially rural villages. *Moba* means help that is returned. Many rural field activities need to be done at a specific time during the year. During this time, neighbours offer their help at, for example, olive harvest in December or help with boat repairs. One striking feature of *moba* is that individuals do not expect to be paid in monetary terms but receive an invite to a food feast and a bottle of olive oil or wine once it is pressed. I participated in such events on a number of occasions. Since non-monetary exchange takes place in the form of gifts, this could be viewed as the part of the ritual of being accepted by the members of the island community. In that case, there is a relationship that runs much deeper than just at the level of social ties because members may be willing to sacrifice their time as well as demonstrate courage and bravery. The Story V below explores these traits through an event that nearly ended tragically.

Story V – search

> It happened on 17th December 2010. It was a typical winter day on the island. It was late afternoon and I was sitting on the pier next to the marina, drinking tea and reading a book. The weather that day was sunny but chilly. I was watching the sunset from the pier. It was my usual routine. And, while I was reading, I noticed one angler arriving at the marina after collecting his fishing net. I knew him personally. He was close to my stepfather. I waved to him and he waved back. There was calmness and silence. At the same time, an old man, my neighbour and the uncle of the angler who had just passed by, left the port. I was thinking: "He is 80 years old but

still very fit". Suddenly, I heard a noise coming from the other side of the pier. My mother was shouting: "Dinner time!" It was time for me to leave the pier and return home. Later, at around 8pm, as we all sat down in the kitchen, the weather suddenly changed. A strong wind, like a blizzard, had started to blow over the island. It turned dark and very cold. It was very unusual for this part of the coastal area to have snow. And while we were all chatting, a Rottweiler called Rona who was sitting on the floor whined and the door abruptly opened with a bang. The angler, who I had waved to earlier, entered the room. Without greeting us, we could see on his face that he was very worried. He turned to my stepfather and said: "Uncle is not back yet. The weather is awful. We need to go and search for him". The scene was like a classic movie, albeit in slow motion. Suddenly there was silence. We all looked at each other and my stepfather quietly turned to me: "Go and fetch me my clothes". I run out, brought back the clothes and helped my stepfather to get dressed. My stepfather has the biggest boat on the island and only he could go out in this weather. Then the two of them went away into the darkness of the sea. I turned to my mother "How on earth are they going to find him in this weather?" We went inside waiting for the news, for a call from them. The clock struck 10pm, then 11pm and midnight, and still there were no news. The phone rang. The sister of the missing man called to ask for news. My mother said to her: "I think you need to call the coast guard". "Yes", she replied, "You are right. We cannot delay it any more". After informing them, the coast guard went out to search for them but very soon gave up due to the bad weather. They said that they would start searching again as soon as the weather cleared in the morning. In the meantime, our men returned but without the missing man. They said they had gone further and further onto the open sea but then they had realised that he could not have gone that far with his little boat and decided to return. They hoped that the man would try to find the safe lighthouse on the nearby island. After a warm drink, we all went to bed but no one could sleep. Around 5.30am, the coast guard rang up saying that they had found the missing old man. He had sought safety at the nearby island, 15min away by boat from our island. Because the weather was so bad, the old man had been forced to abandon his boat and jump out of it before it sank on the shore. He managed to get out of the sea and seek safety in the small lighthouse nearby used by the anglers in case of emergency. The old man managed to survive the night by exercising to stay warm all night and drinking the bottle of whisky left in the cabinet alongside some basic blankets. He knew that the coast guard would look for him. In the morning, the coast guard had resumed the search and spotted him outside the lighthouse. When we heard that he was safe, we all run out of our houses to get a glimpse of him. He looked tired and in a state of shock. I did not speak to him until the following week.

The story touches upon an important issue; humanity and care. To care means to feel toward others, to feel compassion, to support and to help each other within the community. My stepfather did not think twice before deciding to go out with the old man's nephew to the open sea under dangerous blizzard conditions. The boat could capsize and both could lose their lives. Even so, they decided to do it because it is a part of being human, and humanity and care, as the story illustrates, are essential for building the healthy community relationships (Mauss, 1925). In many ways, the event helped me to better understand the place of humanity and care as a part of the cooperative practices related to in preserving the resistance among the rural island communities.

Conclusion

This paper makes use of living stories to provide examples and some basic principles of cooperation as the alternative way of organising island community. Island communities are seen as traditional societies where the most important feature is gift exchange, not monetary value, and the building of healthy social relationships (Mauss, 1925). The examples are based on reciprocity of similar favours and the stories I have chosen illustrate a system of turn taking and includes "social money" (Graeber, 2011). Cooperative practices signifying this, for example friends in needs, gathering and *moba*,

are shown through the stories. The study reaffirms Graeber's (2011) argument about how debts and gifts create and maintain networks, alliances or cooperation. In this sense, island (and village) life is seen as a network of non-monetarised debts and members of the community make sure everyone has debts to each other, and that is the foundation for the community. On a broader plane, deconstructed stories helped in reconstructing the bigger picture of how the people on the island offer collective resistance to, if not to economisation or financialisation (Forsberg and Stockenstrand, 2014), then at least to the competitive and individualistic economy that is present on the mainland, by developing different ways of cooperation. Scott's (1985) hidden scripts of cooperative practices can be found in these living stories that epitomise collective resistance. On a final point, one should also note that "no one has the right to tell us our true value, no one has the right to tell us what we truly owe" (Graeber, 2011, p. 391). Cooperative practices, that include the essential elements such as sympathy, judgment, gift and humanity and care, signify the true value of island life and justify the use of collective resistance on the part of the island community to protect and preserve their island life and culture. "Perhaps we should think of them [islanders] as pioneers of a new economic order that would not share our current one's penchant for self-destruction" (Graeber, 2011, p. 390). I would like readers to think so, too.

Island communities create and maintain resistance through a culture of cooperation. Living stories (I-V) illustrate different instances of cooperative practices, for example, friends in need, gathering, search and *moba*, and where sympathy, gift, and humanity and care are essential elements. Based on reciprocity of taking turns and giving back to the community, they are a strategy for survival and of collective resistance within the rural island communities. It would be interesting to explore whether island communities elsewhere exhibit similar patterns. This is a topic for future ethnographic research as it would require more detailed information about the local islands and their communities. Appreciation of the true value of collective resistance based on gift and reciprocity rather than financialisation and economisation aids to better understanding of the needs of traditional societies of island archipelagos, on the part of policy makers and other stakeholders who are involved in the process of planning for island development.

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