



## Eco-Spiritualism on Social Empowerment: Indigenous Approach toward Environment Sustainability

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**Abstract** The world is changing, the environmental crisis is happening, the life of any living being is on the line. Nature is facing challenges and degradations that will extended to effect on human welfare and all other life on earth. As in the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals agenda, world leaders command every organization to play a role in protecting the planet from degradation, undertake urgent actions to perform sustainable resource management. UIN Walisongo Semarang is answering the call and respond to this global issues by declaring a vision statement to be a “Green Campus”. It is not merely a statement, but a commitment to take responsibility in protecting and conserving the nature, applied in all activities under the Three Pillars of Higher Education (Education, Research, and Community Services). This paper aimed to elaborate the distinct concept and approach of community service activities implemented in UIN Walisongo Semarang. Eco-Spiritualism Social Empowerment program designed based on fundamental spiritual and religious values about how human connect with nature, and so this connection create a reciprocal-inseparable relationship. How human affects nature, and otherwise, will create a belief and values directing human’s behavior toward nature. Therefore, a spiritual approach considered to be an effective way to empower people in order to create an eco-friendly society. Eco-Spiritualism Social Empowerment program implemented in both rural and urban area, are showing great results on recycle and waste management, plastic waste utilization and creating value-added products, skill development and sustainable social empowerment.

**Keyword:**

eco-spiritualism, social empowerment, environment, green campus

### 1. Introduction

Recently, the priority programs in higher education institution are mainly focused in sustainable development and environmental awareness. The stressing on these aspects aimed to response the complex global issues about environment. Crisis on agricultural production, rural poverty, food security and human health are considered as humanity

crisis, where environment took part as one of the causal factor (Warner, Hamza, Oliver-Smith, Renaud, & Julca, 2010); (Mirzabaev, Annagylyjova, & Amirova, 2019). Environmental issues have become a global issue that threatens the future of the world's nations. The United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) has listed 21 environmental problems, which require immediate action to be followed up in sustainable development efforts (Alcamo, 2012). Problems such as climate change, energy, waste, air pollution, biodiversity, food, and changes in human behavior need to be addressed immediately, through various approaches to ensure a sustainable future for the environment (Baluška, 2020). Therefore, it is an urge agenda to perform collaboration among stakeholders to implement programs in sustainable development. There are three challenges of managing stakeholder relationships for sustainability: (1) strengthening the particular sustainability interests of stakeholders; (2) creating mutual sustainability interests based on these particular interest; and (3) empowering stakeholders to act as intermediaries for nature and sustainable development (Hörisch, Freeman, & Schaltegger, 2014).

Walisongo State Islamic University (UIN Walisongo Semarang) has stated the basic principle in university's regulation and management under the concept of "green campus". This conception has framed all of the organization components, either in academic or non-academic, in line with the campus paradigm: the Unity of Science (UoS). The spirit to merge and integrate modern sciences and Islam is the main purpose in UoS, together with the concept about "green campus", enable UIN Walisongo Semarang to design environmental strategies based on environment management system and Islamic values. Eco-spiritualism is a model designed base on the concept of green campus and UoS. This model act as a distinctive norms to manifest the sustainable development goals and environment management system under the framework of *Tri Dharma Perguruan Tinggi* – Three Pillars of Higher Education (comprising education, research, and community service). In educational context, the eco-spiritualism model will manifest in environmental course subjects applied in curriculum at all study majors. While in the context of research and community service, this model will applied to focus on the actual issues in society, especially the environment conservation and ecological issues.

Community services implementation in UIN Walisongo Semarang is using the collaborative model within the scheme of participative contribution involving lecturers and students. The purpose of this activity is to empower the society in order to enhance the quality of life in terms of religiosity, nationality, and citizenship. There are 11 principles underlie the implementation of community service activities, namely: 1) Voluntariness: voluntary action is fundamental in community service; 2) Partnership: collaboration is essential to create a conducive working atmosphere and to optimize services toward community; 3) Empowerment: the main orientation in community service is social empowerment; 4) Integrated: community service as an integrative part under the Three Pillars of Higher Education; 5) Benefit: community service will benefit in personality development, community development, and institutional development; 6) Participative: community service will engage all social components; 7) Interdisciplinary: cross-science and multi-disciplinary approach will optimize community service activities; 8) Equality: community service will minimize the gap by enable access, participation, control, and advantages; 9) Pragmatic-realistic: the implementation of service will be focusing on the availability of resources in order to contribute directly to solve community problems; 10) Lawful: community service implementation needs to be under the legal basis and national law enforcement; 11) *Rahmatan lil 'alamin*: community service is oriented to the highest

values in life to reform peace and blessed environment, *rahmatan lil 'alamin*. The Eco-Spiritualism model in UIN Walisongo Semarang is established under these principles to raise the spirit of serve community based on environmental awareness. Eco-spirituality is based on the fundamental belief about the saint of nature, earth, and universe as a whole creation of God. The theological principle of this ecological perspective can be found in any religious traditions in the world. Eco-spiritualism emphasize the role of nature and environment to strengthen the connection between human and God (The Creator).

Community service as one of the implementation's pivot in the Three Pillars of Higher Education, also contribute to resolve the problems and highlights the role of higher education institution in society. Hence, UIN Walisongo Semarang applies this distinctive Eco-Spiritualism model to focus on social empowerment by collaborating sciences (as in the UoS paradigm) and designing vocational activities to improve skills, increase product values, and raising competitiveness in creating efficient technologies. The scope of this model implementation is in the industrial and creative economic aspects, regarding to the urgency of social needs and responding to 4.0 era. The next mission of Eco-Spiritualism implementation is related to poverty alleviation. To increase the human development index, this model enable family empowerment and life skill training so that the living standards will raise and contribute to poverty alleviation.

These two missions of Eco-Spiritualism model represents in an integrative activity programs involving both lecturers and students to perform community service simultaneously in Karimunjawa Island and Semarang City. Eco-spiritualism approach as the basis in implementing community service program in Semarang and Karimunjawa is important to develop collective awareness as a resemblance and image the pure souls of their residents. Urban and rural location selected in this program is based on the same environmental issues background, thus, it will be focusing on the plastic waste management. The "Plastic Diet Program" is a plastic waste management program formulated after a long term observation about the increase of plastic waste in both urban and rural area (in this case: Semarang City and Karimunjawa Island). Karimunjawa Island as a rural area with beautiful natural resources attracts many tourists along with the consequences of harvesting plastic waste. While in the urban area of Semarang City, the enormous amount of plastic waste were the result of industrial and household activities. There are three significant roles of environmental-based community services activities, namely: 1) Optimize the contribution of higher education in initiating an appropriate problem solving, a progressive and contextual action toward many problems in society, especially to handle the complex issues of environmental degradation; 2) Improving the level of prosperity and well-being in society through progressive actions in creative economics and developing local potentials; 3) Act as a contribution from higher education to support 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

## **2. Climbing the Stairs of Spiritualism and Nurturing the Nature: An Analysis on Eco-Spiritualism**

Human and nature are united, inseparable. Natural destruction will have impact on the life human being. It means that the existence of human being depends on the highly order of nature. But oddly, the literature shows that ecological problem and crisis are actually happening inside the structure of beliefs and values of human being. Ziauddin Sardar (1985) views the root of human's ecological crisis is axiomatic, exist inside man's belief and value system and continue to grow as human maintain the relations with nature and all of its

creatures. Thus, to cope with ecological crisis nowadays, we need more than conventional approaches. We need to evolve and accelerate the legal approach on contra-pollution, industrial waste, or plastic waste into a more effective approach. To relive awareness on the spiritual and religious aspect of nature claimed to be the only effective way to direct human performs eco-friendly behavior. As stated by S. Parves Manzoor (1988), to make human gain efforts to conserve and protect the nature or environment, start from developing their awareness and ethical religious values on ecology. This awareness is an internal process, raising the power within to enable human use the power from outside themselves.

Eco-Spirituality is based on fundamental belief about nature purity, earth, and universe as unification of God's creation. History shows that eco-spirituality is a tradition performed since a long time ago, since the beginning of life. Eco-Spirituality aimed to seek the essential meaning about the connection between human and nature inside the infinite universe, either as a whole or as a part of God's creation. As a perspective, the theological principle of eco-spirituality can be found in any religious traditions in the world. Eco-spirituality is based on the immanent perspective of God, believe that God is present in the structure of universe and intervene human's life. So it is beyond the transcendence perspective that views God is apart, distant, and impossible to comprehend. In Islam, the trilogy among God as the Creator, human as the *khalifa* and earth has been practiced since the era of Prophet Muhammad, but recently, this practice is only implemented in tasawuf. *Mulla Sadra*, for example, is a form of unique relationship among God, human, and nature, picturing the image of harmony between human and nature, as implemented by Seyyed Hossein Nasr. He views the environment crisis as an impact from human's neglect toward perennial truths. It means that human in the modern era tends to neglect the essential values in religion, it is the crisis of spiritual and religiosity that caused the crisis in environment.

UIN Walisongo Semarang's community service activities in Karimunjawa Island and Semarang City carried out the vision of Green Campus to establish green environment has a matched point of view with the ecological spiritual approach. Since the activities will involve all components in the community, despite all the difference, collaborating to protect and preserve the Mother Earth. Mutual cleaning work (*kerja bakti*), mangrove reforestation, plastic diet, decomposing, and plastic waste utilization are some activities in UIN Waisongo student's community service (*Kuliah Kerja Nyata – KKN*). In eco-spiritualism perspective, cleaning the environment will build collective awareness as a resemblance of pure souls. Mangrove reforestation is a form of activity to boost the spiritual immunity, as a shield from wild and sinful desires. If managed well, these activities will become habit and preserve not only the environment but also the positive energy and decent behavior.

Eco-spiritualism approach as the basis in implementing community service program in Semarang and Karimunjawa is important to develop collective awareness as a resemblance and image the pure souls of their residents. *Tahalli* and *takhalli* is the Islamic interpretation of recycling and utilizing process or plastic waste. It means that every souls has the right to be clean from sins. It resembles the journey of how human achieve a higher spiritual level after being drowned in a sinful life. A journey to be a valuable being after feeling helpless and dirty. From Eco-spiritualism we can analyzed that the relationship between human and nature is actually not transactional, but a harmony. And its true meaning is nowhere to be found unless we relate it with the Almighty substance of the universe, that is God. Seyyed Hossein Nasr implied that protecting nature is a God-given task for human. Human is appointed because of the intellectual property is above any other creatures. Thus, the

quality of relationship between human and God is highly reliable on how human use their intellectuality to treat the nature, to harmonize themselves with environment and other creatures living in it.

A harmonious relationship between God, human, and nature represents the expression of a deep gratitude. Humans are the most highly-designed creature with all of the built-in intellectual and mental properties. Humans are even capable to learn and develop their potential, gaining something from zero to be achieve more either in quantity or quality. Human’s sense enable them to engage with nature, their mind can construct knowledge, while their heart can reach for God. All of these super qualifications are representation of God’s character, live inside of every human being. This is the main and inevitable consequences for human to have responsibilities toward environmental management and nature preservation. Humans are God for their environment.

### 3. The Implementation of Eco-Spiritualism on Social Empowerment in Semarang City and Karimunjawa Island

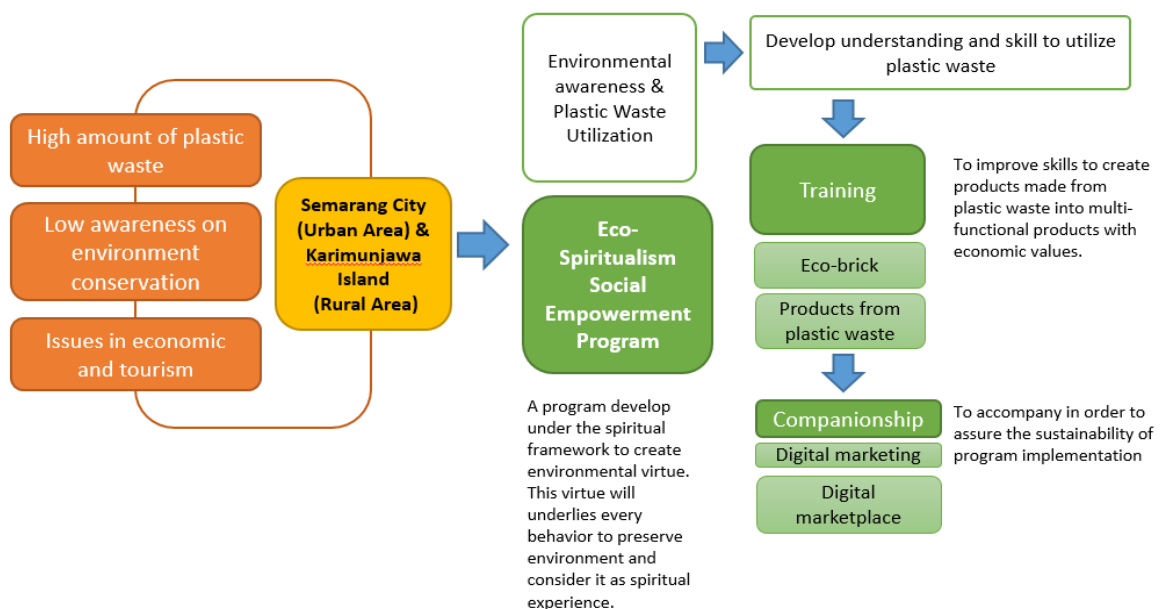


Figure 1: Eco-Spiritualism Social Empowerment on Environmental awareness and Plastic Waste Utilization

The conceptual background of eco-spiritualism social empowerment in Karimunjawa Island and Semarang City based on three factors. First, Karimunjawa Island and Semarang City as the melting pot of multi-ethnic society. There are some ethnics in Karimunjawa Island and Semarang City, such as ethnic Javanese, Bugis, Mandar, Chinese, Minang, Batak, Sundanese, Tionghoa, etc. Second, people in Karimunjawa Island and Semarang city are religious society, they are embrace the same values of religious belief which significantly affects on the way of life and daily activities. Third, Karimunjawa Island and Semarang City face the emerging threat for environmental damage. The enormous amount of plastic wastes as a negative impact of social activities: tourism in Karimunjawa Island, industrial and household activities in Semarang City. Based on these factors, UIN Walisongo Semarang develop the eco-spiritualism social empowerment as an exit way toward environment sustainability. A program develop under the spiritual framework to create environmental

virtue (kesalehan lingkungan). This virtue will underlies every behavior to preserve environment and consider it as spiritual experience.

Social empowerment identic with the style and mode of facilitation, influence who takes part, the nature of outcomes and power relationships. Much depends on the behaviour and attitudes of facilitators and who controls the process. Many ethical issues present troubling dilemmas, and lead to overarching questions about empowerment and ownership (Ferraro, Schilling, Baeza, Oms, & Sá, 2020). Eco-spiritualism social empowerment in Karimunjawa Island and Semarang City context using Chamber's (1983) theoretical perspective who focus on four aspect in empowerment: people centered, participatory, empowering and sustainable. People centered refers to orientation of social empowerment who based on aspiration, needs, potential resources to manage and utilize plastic waste as the main environment issue in Karimunjawa Island and Semarang City. Participatory aspect refers to voluntary participation from all social components regarding their role and portions. Empowering aspect refers to improve capacity and skills of society, in this Karimunjawa Island and Semarang City's empowering program focus on utilizing plastic waste. The implementation of empowering program is training ecobrick in Karimunjawa, starting by collecting used plastic bottles and plastic wastes. The focus of the training in Semarang City is to create multi-function products with economic values such as: satchel bag, tote bag, etc. Sustainability aspect refers to formulation of social empowerment program which considering the continuity, as an indicator to observe society ability and ensuring sustainable improvements. To accompany in order to assure the sustainability of program implementation. In this program, the companionship is held digitally by conducting digital marketing with operating website to promote local tourism service and optimizing the website to promote and sell the recycled products directly from the producers.

#### **4. Eco-Spiritualism Social Empowerment Program: An Impact Analysis**

Eco-spiritualism social empowerment implemented in community service activities directly impact the community. First, this community service activities reduce the amount of plastic waste. Especially the enormous amount of plastic waste in the lands and oceans of Karimunjawa Island which remain unsolved for a long time. Second, adding values on plastic waste by utilization into products with functional dan financial values. Plastic waste in Karimunjawa Island was reformed into eco-brick products, such as furniture (chair and table) displayed in Bugis Town Square and seaweed agricultural space. While in Semarang, plastics waste has advanced into products like tote bag, shopping bag, tissue box, accessories box, and other functional and marketable items.

Religious and cultural values in Karimunjawa Island and Semarang City become a great supporting factors in this program. People of this island holds a basic living religion values about hygiene as a part of faith (*iman*), thus, performing a clean living habit is an act of expressing faith and respecting God's creation. This value encourages people to be responsible and careful to preserve their local environment. They realized that environment sustainability determined the sustainability of life on every living being in the ecosystem. Ocean abrasion in Semarang City and Karimunjawa Island were also provides a devastating facts that this is the challenge they will face inevitably.

Furthermore, traditional values also play supportive role in the implementation of this environment-based community service program. *Gotong royong*, an activity of mutual work, is a cultural tradition performed both in Javanese rural and urban area, including in Karimunjawa Island and Semarang City. Working mutually is an expression of collective

awareness in society. This spirit of mutualism cultivate a deeper understanding that overcoming environmental issues is a shared responsibility. Commitment and collaboration are prerequisites to develop skills in surviving this emerging environmental crisis.

## 5. Conclusion

There are three conclusions to be summarize from the implementation review of this environment conservation-based community service took place in Karimunjawa Island and Semarang City. First, religious values significantly determined the effectiveness of community service's program implementation. Community service activities show that people in Semarang City and Karimunjawa Island is a religious society. Religious values in form of environmental virtues encourage them to maintain awareness and effort to preserve their local environment. People are aware of the emerging threat of environmental breakdown, enormous of undegradable plastic waste that slowly ruin the ecosystem. They believe that protecting the nature (*hifdz al-bi'ah*) is a significant part of expressing gratitude to the universe (*rahmatan lil 'alamin*).

Second, cultural values also played important determinant role on the program implementation's effectiveness in Karimunjawa Island and Semarang City. Conception of cultural values and collective ideal norms underlie the approach and implementation techniques in this environmental-based community service program. In terms of conceptual urgency to apply cultural values as well as the missions of the program, plastic waste utilization in Karimunjawa Island conducted collectively, performing mutual work, starting from collecting the waste in local tourism areas, making eco-brick from plastic scratches, and finally using eco-brick as media for planting. These range of activities represent the character of people in Karimunjawa, a tolerant and harmonious society. Harmony in diversity is the fundamental spirit while performing collective activities, local professional backgrounds as fishermen or tourism service providers should encourage Karimunjawa people to ensure environment sustainability, as it will impact their economy. In Semarang City, the cultural approach applied personally, although collective activities like education and training is also available. Basically, the plastic waste management in industrial and household setting were managed independently.

The third point to be remarked is that the digital management on the program's outputs result significantly on the sustainability of the program itself. Integration of environmental-based community service program and the web management system allowed the output and products to be widely recognized. This web can even published a broader range of information in environment sustainability campaign and tourism advertisement. As marketplace, this website can also construct a better branding and promotion. Series of social empowerment activities based on eco-spiritualism formulated to be contributions from higher education to support 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially in the context of environment conservation and social economic improvement.

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