



Embedding Indigenous Values in Blue Economy Governance: The Gemohing Cultural Values for Coastal Tourism Development in Mekko, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the potential integration of the Gemohing cultural values of the Lamaholot community into a blue economy management model in Hamlet III Mekko, Pledo Village, Witiham District, East Flores Regency. Gemohing values, which reflect the spirit of mutual cooperation, deliberation, solidarity, and fair benefit sharing, have historically developed in land-based activities but have strategic relevance for marine and coastal resource management. The research method combines a qualitative approach through literature review, in-depth interviews, and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with key stakeholders, including local government, village government, traditional leaders, and the Bajo community. The results show that the Bajo community faces socio-economic challenges such as structural poverty, low access to education, limited institutional capacity, and minimal participation in decision-making. Although Mekko has high ecological and marine tourism potential, its utilization has not been optimal due to weak coordination between stakeholders and limited infrastructure. The proposed Gemohing-based management model positions the community as the main actor through participatory mechanisms, proportional benefit sharing, and cross-sector collaboration, thus potentially improving economic welfare while maintaining the sustainability of the marine ecosystem.

INTRODUCTION

The blue economy has emerged globally as a strategic development framework for coastal and archipelagic nations seeking to balance economic growth, social equity, and marine ecosystem sustainability (Keen et al., 2018). Internationally, this approach has been promoted by organizations such as the United Nations and the World Bank in response to widespread marine degradation, overexploitation of fisheries, and persistent inequalities in access to ocean resources affecting coastal communities, particularly in developing island states (Phelan et al., 2020; Sumaila & Villasante, 2025). While the blue economy is often presented as a pathway toward inclusive and sustainable ocean governance, its implementation in many regions remains technocratic, growth-oriented, and insufficiently grounded in local socio-cultural realities, leading to new forms of exclusion and environmental risk (Elston 2024; Voyer et al., 2020).

Indonesia, as the world's largest archipelagic state, has positioned the blue economy as a national development priority through Presidential Regulation No. 16 of 2017 and its incorporation into the Asta Cita framework within the 2025–2029 State Budget (Firdaus & Wibowo, 2024). This policy orientation reflects Indonesia's vast marine potential and its ambition to strengthen coastal livelihoods while ensuring ecological sustainability. At the local level, East Flores Regency represents a critical case where the blue economy discourse intersects with persistent structural poverty and uneven development. Despite significant marine and fisheries resources, local governments have struggled to translate blue economy policies into tangible welfare improvements for coastal communities, including through the establishment of Regionally-Owned Enterprises (BUMD) aimed at increasing Regional Own Revenue (PAD) (Qurbani et al., 2020; Suryadi et al., 2021).

One strategic yet paradoxical area is the Mekko coastal waters in Pledo Village, Witiham District. Designated as an Area II marine park with limited-use zoning under the 2021 Decree of the Minister of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries and included in the Strategic Tourism Area by Regional Regulation No. 2 of 2013, Mekko possesses exceptional marine tourism assets. These include award-winning sand dunes, fringing coral reef ecosystems, shark habitats, and potential for pearl cultivation and salt production (Farahwati, 2024; Malik, 2024; Taum, 2022). However, despite this ecological and tourism potential, Mekko experiences extreme socio-economic vulnerability. Poverty rates have reached approximately 60%, contributing 26–28% of total poverty in East Flores Regency between 2017 and 2022 (Madrim, 2024). This stark contradiction highlights a critical research problem: the failure of blue economy implementation to equitably benefit local coastal communities, particularly the Bajo people, who remain marginalized within marine tourism and resource governance.

Existing studies attribute this condition to structural constraints, including low human resource capacity, limited access to education and health services, inadequate infrastructure, and restricted access to technology and capital (Muavi & Romadhon, 2024; Thomas et al., 2021). At a broader level, international research on island and coastal tourism in regions such as the Caribbean, the Mediterranean, and Southeast Asia demonstrates similar patterns, where marine tourism development often leads to ecosystem degradation and the displacement or marginalization of small-scale fishers (Hampton & Jeyacheya, 2020). These findings underscore a global challenge: blue economy initiatives frequently overlook local social structures, indigenous rights, and cultural values, thereby undermining their stated goals of inclusivity and sustainability.

Although academic literature has extensively explored the blue economy from environmental, infrastructural, and technological perspectives (Bhatia, 2022; Vázquez, 2021; Spalding, 2016), limited attention has been given to the role of local wisdom and cultural values as strategic social capital in blue economy governance. In Indonesia, studies on local wisdom such as those in Southeast Sulawesi and Rupert Island have emphasized cultural practices in marine conservation (Bagea, 2016), yet they rarely translate these values into an operational model for participatory marine tourism and economic development. This gap is particularly evident in blue economy-based tourism management, where community participation often remains symbolic rather than transformative.

To address this gap, this research focuses on the *Gemohing* culture of the Lamaholot community in East Flores. *Gemohing* embodies deeply rooted values of mutual cooperation, trust, and collective responsibility, functioning as a form of social capital that has not yet been systematically integrated into blue economy policy or practice. Drawing on Putnam (2001) social capital theory, this study positions *Gemohing* as a culturally grounded framework for fostering participatory, equitable, and sustainable marine tourism management for the Bajo community in Mekko.

The purpose of this research is twofold: (1) to analyze the existing conditions and challenges of blue economy implementation in the Mekko coastal area in relation to Bajo community empowerment; and (2) to formulate a participatory blue economy management model that strategically integrates *Gemohing* cultural values into marine tourism governance. The significance of this study lies in its contribution to both theory and practice. Conceptually, it advances the international discourse on the blue economy by demonstrating how local socio-cultural values can function as operational social capital rather than peripheral considerations. Practically, it offers a context-sensitive model for policymakers and practitioners seeking to design blue economy initiatives that are socially inclusive, culturally legitimate, and environmentally sustainable both in Indonesia and in other archipelagic and small-island contexts worldwide.

METHOD

This research employed a qualitative descriptive approach with a case study strategy to examine in depth the practice of *Gemohing* culture in blue economy-based marine tourism management within the Bajo community of Mekko. This approach was selected because it allows for an in-depth exploration of social meanings, cultural values, and participatory practices embedded in the everyday life of coastal communities, which cannot be adequately captured through quantitative methods (Mohajan, 2018). The case study design enabled a contextual and holistic understanding of the interaction between local culture, marine tourism development, and coastal resource governance.

The study was conducted in Mekko Hamlet III, Pledo Village, Witiham District, East Flores Regency, over a period of eight months. Data sources consisted of primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained directly from the field through interaction with community members and relevant stakeholders, while secondary data were collected from academic journals, books, government regulations, policy documents, NGO reports, and other relevant publications related to the blue economy, marine tourism, and local wisdom.

A total of 20 informants were selected using purposive sampling based on their knowledge, roles, and involvement in *Gemohing* cultural practices and marine tourism management in Mekko. Informants included traditional and customary leaders, community leaders, Bajo fishermen, officials from the East Flores Regency and Pledo Village governments, the Head of Mekko Hamlet III, and representatives of WWF-Indonesia operating in the area. This selection ensured that multiple perspectives from cultural, governance, conservation, and livelihood dimensions were represented.

Data collection was carried out through participant observation, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and documentation studies. Participant observation was conducted at marine tourism sites and within the daily living spaces of the Bajo community to understand how *Gemohing* values are practiced in everyday social and economic activities. In-depth interviews were used to explore stakeholders' perceptions, experiences, and challenges related to the implementation of the blue economy. Focus group discussions facilitated the collection of collective views and served as a means of validating shared interpretations among stakeholders. Documentation studies complemented field data by providing institutional and policy context.

Data analysis followed a qualitative thematic process, beginning with the transcription of interviews and field notes, followed by data reduction to identify information relevant to the research objectives. The data were then coded and categorized into key themes, including *Gemohing* cultural values, community participation, and marine tourism governance. Thematic interpretation was used to explain the role of *Gemohing* culture as social capital in supporting a fair, participatory, and sustainable blue economy model. Data validity was strengthened through source triangulation by comparing information obtained from different informants and data collection methods, ensuring the credibility and robustness of the findings. kasih ide tabel atau grafik pada paraagraf ini.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Gemohing Culture: Social Foundations in Coastal Resource Management

Etymologically, *gemohing* derives from the Lamaholot word *gemohe*, meaning "helping each other" or "working together voluntarily and rotationally without material compensation." Beyond its practical function, *gemohing* represents a form of collective consciousness grounded in mutual support to meet shared needs at the household, kinship, and community levels. Similar to other communal labor traditions found across maritime and agrarian societies such as *gotong royong* in Java or *bayanihan* in the Philippines, *gemohing* functions as a culturally embedded mechanism for strengthening social cohesion and collective resilience (Bagea, 2016; Putnam, 2001). In Lamaholot society, *gemohing* has historically been rooted in land-based activities, particularly agriculture and settlement construction, including land clearing, planting, harvesting, and house building. Its core values—solidarity, trust, shared responsibility, and consensus-based norms—constitute a form of bonding social capital that regulates social relations and minimizes conflict through deliberation.

These findings are consistent with studies emphasizing that local cultural institutions play a crucial role in sustaining collective action and resource governance, especially in contexts where formal institutions are weak or poorly enforced (Bagea,

2016; Ostrom, 2015). However, this study reveals a critical limitation: despite its strong cooperative potential, *gemohing* has not been extended to coastal and marine resource management. Its application remains predominantly land-oriented, thereby excluding the marine sector from culturally grounded governance mechanisms. This condition mirrors findings from other coastal regions in Indonesia and Southeast Asia, where local wisdom is often confined to conservation rituals or symbolic practices and rarely translated into operational frameworks for marine tourism or blue economy governance (Hampton & Jeyacheya, 2020; Voyer et al., 2020).

The absence of *gemohing* in marine governance simultaneously reveals a structural gap and a strategic opportunity. In Mekko, a region with high marine tourism potential but low levels of local participation and welfare, the lack of culturally resonant governance mechanisms has contributed to the dominance of technocratic and externally driven blue economy interventions. Similar patterns have been documented in island tourism contexts in the Caribbean and the Mediterranean, where tourism development often marginalizes local fishers due to weak social integration and unequal benefit distribution (Koralagama et al., 2017; Peterson, 2015). This study extends these insights by showing that the challenge in Mekko is not merely institutional or economic, but deeply socio-cultural.

For the Bajo community, who are ethnically and culturally distinct from the Lamaholot, *gemohing* is not an inherited tradition. Nevertheless, this research finds that the fundamental principles underlying *gemohing* voluntary cooperation, solidarity, reciprocity, and fairness resonate strongly with the communal values of the Bajo, particularly in their collective fishing practices and kinship-based survival strategies. This finding supports previous research suggesting that social capital values can transcend ethnic boundaries when they are adapted contextually rather than imposed normatively (Turschwell et al., 2022). In this sense, *gemohing* functions not as a rigid cultural transplant but as a flexible social framework capable of fostering cross-cultural collaboration.

Within the blue economy paradigm, which emphasizes sustainable marine resource management and inclusive economic growth, the integration of *gemohing* offers a socially grounded alternative to purely technocratic governance models. Studies by Schutter et al., (2021) and Voyer et al., (2020) argue that blue economy initiatives fail when they neglect trust-building, local legitimacy, and participatory norms. The findings of this research empirically reinforce these arguments by demonstrating that *gemohing*, when contextualized for the Bajo community, can enhance community participation, strengthen governance legitimacy, and promote a more equitable distribution of marine tourism benefits.

Adopting *gemohing* into Mekko's marine tourism governance therefore requires a deliberate process of contextualization, whereby its values are adapted to the social structure, livelihood patterns, and economic aspirations of the Bajo community without eroding their original ethical foundations. When embedded within blue economy practices, *gemohing* has the potential to bridge the gap between policy-driven development and lived social realities. This study thus contributes to the broader literature by demonstrating that local wisdom can move beyond conservation symbolism to become an operational social capital framework for inclusive, sustainable, and community-centered blue economy governance.

Socio-Economic Conditions and Dynamics of Blue Economy Management in Mexico

The Bajo community in Mekko Hamlet III represents a migrant coastal group with a historically nomadic marine-based livelihood. Their settlement in Mekko is not grounded in land ownership or customary marine tenure, but rather in social agreements with the Lamabelawa (Kole) tribal landowners in Witiham. This condition places the Bajo community in a structurally weak bargaining position, as they lack secure access and control over coastal and marine resources. Similar conditions have been documented among migrant fishing communities in Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands, where the absence of customary rights often translates into political marginalization and limited participation in coastal governance (Bavinck & Scholtens, 2018).

Socially and culturally, the Bajo community in Mekko faces deep-rooted internal challenges that constrain collective action. This study finds that individualistic livelihood patterns, high social jealousy, and weak organizational capacity undermine sustained cooperation. These findings align with Tschakert et al., (2016), who argue that in many island tourism contexts, marginalized fishing communities struggle to engage in collective governance due to internal fragmentation and unequal benefit expectations. Low access to formal education further exacerbates these conditions by limiting adaptive capacity, economic literacy, and meaningful participation in collective decision-making processes. Comparable patterns have been observed in coastal communities in eastern Indonesia and small island states, where low educational attainment correlates strongly with limited engagement in resource management and tourism planning (Albasri & Sammut, 2022; Teniwut et al., 2023).

Economically, the Bajo community in Mekko is trapped in a cycle of structural poverty, with approximately 90% of residents living below the poverty line. This level of vulnerability is consistent with findings from other blue economy case studies, which show that coastal communities often remain poor despite proximity to high-value marine resources and tourism development (Evans et al., 2023). The absence of a fishing cooperative in Mekko limits access to capital, equipment, and market networks, reinforcing dependency on loan sharks and informal credit systems. Praptiwi et al., (2021), emphasize that such debt-based relationships are a common feature of small-scale fisheries globally and serve to reproduce poverty rather than alleviate it. Irregular fishing incomes, shaped by seasonal variability and climate conditions, further intensify household economic insecurity, as also observed in other small-island fisheries systems (Huxham et al., 2015).

From an ecological standpoint, Mekko possesses significant assets for blue economy development, including relatively healthy coral reef ecosystems, clear waters, and high-value fish habitats. International research demonstrates that conservation-area status can enhance long-term sustainability but often introduces new access restrictions that disproportionately affect marginalized fishers when not accompanied by inclusive governance (Dawson et al., 2018). In Mekko, marine tourism management is administered by the Pledo Village government through the Tourism Awareness Group (Pokdarwis) under a formal profit-sharing scheme. While this arrangement reflects institutionalized benefit-sharing, this study finds that the Bajo community remains largely excluded from direct participation and decision-making, echoing broader critiques that community-

based tourism initiatives often remain elite-driven or administratively controlled (Maphosa et al., 2025).

The dominance of local government, village authorities, and external private actors particularly pearl farming companies further reinforces a technocratic and top-down governance model. Similar governance patterns have been identified in blue economy initiatives across the Global South, where state and private sector actors exercise disproportionate influence over marine resource management, while local institutions and customary structures are marginalized. Weak coordination among stakeholders in Mekko results in overlapping mandates, inefficiencies, and limited policy coherence, conditions that have also been noted in comparative studies of coastal governance in Indonesia and other archipelagic states (Midlen, 2024; Yuan et al., 2024).

From a blue economy perspective, the findings reveal a pronounced mismatch between marine resource potential and the actual socio-economic benefits realized by the Bajo community. This discrepancy reflects a broader global challenge in blue economy implementation, where ecological and economic objectives advance faster than social inclusion and institutional capacity building. International experience suggests that bridging this gap requires strengthening community-based institutions, enhancing human capital, and fostering multi-actor governance frameworks that recognize local socio-cultural contexts and power asymmetries (Cisneros-Montemayor et al., 2021).

This study contributes to the literature by demonstrating that without inclusive, culturally grounded, and participatory governance mechanisms, blue economy initiatives risk reproducing structural inequality rather than alleviating it. In the Mekko context, achieving ecological sustainability and community well-being depends not only on resource potential, but on the deliberate integration of social capital, empowerment strategies, and cross-actor collaboration that place marginalized coastal communities such as the Bajo at the center of marine tourism and fisheries governance.

Blue Economy Management Model Based on Gemohing Cultural Values

The Gemohing culture in the Lamaholot community embodies fundamental values: mutual cooperation, social solidarity, shared beliefs and norms, deliberation, and collective responsibility. While these values have been vigorously implemented in land-based activities such as agriculture, traditional ceremonies, and the construction of public facilities, their essence can be adapted to build more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable marine resource governance. This aligns with the view that local social capital can be the foundation for effective coastal area management by strengthening legitimacy, participation, and community ownership of resources (Kithiia, 2015).

In the Mekko context, the application of Gemohing values is relevant for overcoming limitations in collaboration within the Bajo community and building synergy between groups. The Gemohing-based blue economy management model is designed to integrate the marine sector marine tourism, capture fisheries, mariculture, and conservation into a single integrated system operated by various local actors. This model framework begins with the establishment of a joint management forum involving the Bajo community, village government, landowners (landlords), local business actors, and Lamaholot figures as guardians of

cultural values. This forum serves as a deliberation center for planning resource utilization, establishing benefit-sharing schemes, designating conservation zones, and developing collective oversight mechanisms.

The integration of Gemohing values is realized through the following mechanisms:

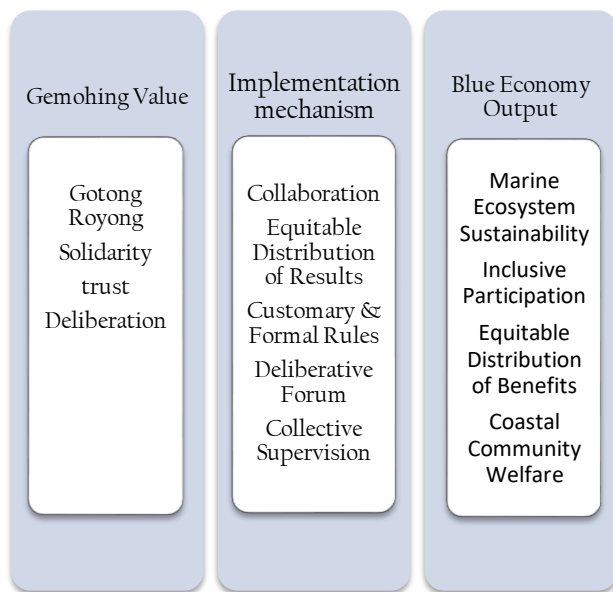
1. Mutual cooperation → working together to maintain marine tourism facilities, build environmentally friendly fishing gear, and restore aquatic ecosystems.
2. Social solidarity → a transparent and equitable scheme for sharing catches and tourism revenues, ensuring all parties receive proportional benefits.
3. Shared trust and norms → agreements on marine use are outlined in customary regulations and reinforced by village regulations, serving as shared guidelines for all stakeholders.
4. Deliberation → The forum is used to formulate business plans, discuss operational constraints, and collectively resolve conflicts of interest.
5. Collective responsibility → the formation of a joint monitoring team comprising the community, traditional leaders, and the village government to ensure that economic activities comply with agreements and maintain ecosystem sustainability.

The role of local institutions, such as the Pledo Village government and the Tourism Awareness Group (Pokdarwis), is key to implementing this model. They are tasked with coordinating between groups, regulating the distribution of benefits, and facilitating training in community-based business management. Partnerships with the private sector, such as pearl farming companies in Mekko, can be directed at supporting production facilities, developing tourism infrastructure, and developing value-added seafood processing programs. Support from academics and NGOs will strengthen technical capacity, innovation, and marketing networks.

The advantage of this model is its ability to make cultural values a pillar of the blue economy, ensuring management is not solely oriented toward economic profit but also strengthens social networks, increases mutual trust, and promotes environmental sustainability. This approach reduces the potential for conflict, increases participation, and provides a more equitable distribution of benefits. However, its implementation must address challenges such as low financial literacy, differences in work culture between the Bajo and Lamaholot communities, and potential conflicts of interest. Sustainable development strategies, cross-community dialogue, and the role of local leaders as cultural mediators are crucial steps for long-term success.

This model also has the potential to be replicated in other coastal areas with similar local wisdom. The principles of Gemohing mutual cooperation, solidarity, trust, deliberation, and collective responsibility can be adapted to local cultural contexts, providing a flexible framework for realizing a blue economy that preserves the ocean while improving the well-being of coastal communities.

Figure 1. Flowchart of Integrating Gemohing Values into the Blue Economy Model



After understanding the model framework through the diagram above, it's important to emphasize the fundamental differences between conventional marine management approaches and the Gemohing value-based model. This comparison is key to demonstrating the proposed model's added value, both socially, culturally, and ecologically.

Table 1. Comparison of Conventional Marine Management vs. Geothermal-Based Models

Aspec	Conventional Marine Management	A Gemohing-Based Economic Model
Basic Philosophy	Exploitation of resources for short-term	Sustainable utilization that integrates social welfare, culture, and technology
Management Actors	economic gain Dominant government and private sector	Multi-actor collaboration: Bajo communities, village governments, landowners, local businesses, and traditional leaders
Community Participation	Low, tends to be top-down	High, based on deliberation and collective decision-making
Benefit Sharing	Often uneven and triggering inequality	Transparent, fair, and based on social solidarity Collective oversight by the community,
Supervision	Sometimes weak, dependent on the authorities	traditional leaders, and village government

Social Resilience	Prone to conflict division	Strengthening social networks and a sense of shared ownership
Ecological Sustainability	Not always a priority	Becoming a key pillar of shared community well-being

Source:

The table above shows that the Gemohing-based model has significant advantages over conventional management. Conventional management tends to be centralized, lacks participation, and focuses on short-term economic gains, often neglecting ecosystem sustainability and local cultural values. In contrast, the Gemohing-based model prioritizes multi-actor collaboration, collective decisions through deliberation, equitable benefit sharing, and the integration of the values of mutual cooperation, solidarity, trust, and collective responsibility into governance.

This approach not only strengthens social networks and a sense of shared ownership but also ensures that marine ecosystem sustainability is a key pillar, along with improving the well-being of coastal communities. By adopting this model, Mekko has the opportunity to move away from exploitative management patterns and toward more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable governance. This paradigm shift is expected to increase community social resilience, minimize the potential for conflict, and maximize the potential of the blue economy in a sustainable manner.

Implications and Recommendations for Strengthening Community-Based Blue Economy Management

Not only considering the ecological dimension, but also integrating social, cultural, and economic factors. The rich potential of the Mekko sea white sandy beaches, coral reef ecosystems, and high-value fisheries has not been fully utilized for the welfare of coastal communities. Structural barriers such as weak local institutions, low economic literacy, and a lack of synergy among stakeholders are key inhibiting factors. In this context, the Gemohing values rooted in the Lamaholot community mutual cooperation, solidarity, trust, deliberation, and collective responsibility can be adapted to strengthen more inclusive marine and coastal governance. The application of these values can improve relationships between groups, including the migrant Bajo community, and other local stakeholders, thereby creating a solid social foundation for long-term collaboration. Implications of Gemohing Value Integration:

1. Social Dimension

The integration of Gemohing values builds trust networks that strengthen social cohesion and reduce the potential for horizontal conflict. This trust serves as important social capital that supports participatory decision-making. In the context of Mekko, a deliberation mechanism based on Gemohing can serve as a forum for the Bajo community, village government, traditional leaders, and business actors to collectively establish management policies.

2. Economic Dimension

The principle of benefit-sharing in Gemohing has the potential to improve income distribution and reduce inequality. A simple simulation shows that if 30% of the income of fish-shooting fishermen (averaging IDR 1 million/day) is allocated to joint capital, approximately IDR 328 million can be collected in one year (assuming 10 active fishermen, 328 effective days). This fund is sufficient to form a fishermen's cooperative, purchase 5–6 fishing boats, or finance environmentally friendly fishing gear.

3. Ecological Dimension

Gotong royong in Gemohing can be directed towards conservation activities, such as coral reef restoration and beach cleanups. Studies of community-based marine protected areas show that active community participation can increase fish biomass by 20–40% within five years, directly impacting the sustainability of fisheries and marine tourism.

The strategic recommendations formulated in this study are consistent with, and reinforced by, a growing body of international and national research on inclusive blue economy governance. First, strengthening local institutions particularly the Pledo Village Government and the Tourism Awareness Group (Pokdarwis) as coordination hubs for marine tourism management aligns with findings that effective local institutions are critical for translating blue economy policies into community-level benefits. Studies in Southeast Asia and small island developing states demonstrate that village-based institutions equipped with managerial, financial, and marketing skills significantly enhance local value capture from marine tourism and fisheries. Training in business management and financial literacy is especially important, as low economic literacy has been identified as a major barrier to community participation in coastal enterprises (Kyeyune & Ntayi, 2024).

Second, improving access to resources, technology, and capital directly addresses structural constraints faced by small-scale fishers. International evidence shows that without access to appropriate fishing technology, cold storage, and market infrastructure, coastal communities remain locked into low-value supply chains, even in high-potential marine tourism areas. Technology transfer and capital access, when facilitated through community institutions rather than individual actors, have been shown to reduce inequality and enhance collective resilience (Archer et al., 2020).

Third, the establishment of a fishermen's cooperative is strongly supported by comparative studies of small-scale fisheries governance. Cooperatives function not only as providers of revolving capital and environmentally friendly fishing gear, but also as platforms for collective bargaining, price stabilization, and market access. Research from Indonesia, the Philippines, and Latin America indicates that fisheries cooperatives can significantly reduce dependency on informal moneylenders and improve income stability, provided they are embedded in local social norms and trust-based relations. In the Mekko context, the values of *gemohing* mutual trust, reciprocity, and shared responsibility provide a culturally legitimate foundation for cooperative governance.

Fourth, enhancing participation and equitable benefit sharing through formal deliberation forums responds directly to critiques of blue economy initiatives as exclusionary and elite-driven. Studies on marine spatial planning and community-based tourism emphasize that participatory zoning, transparent

benefit-sharing mechanisms, and joint rule-making processes are essential for securing local legitimacy and long-term compliance (Martin, 2021).

Fifth, community-based monitoring and evaluation systems are widely recognized as effective tools for ensuring regulatory compliance and ecological sustainability. Empirical studies show that joint monitoring involving local communities, customary leaders, and local governments not only reduces enforcement costs but also strengthens community ownership over conservation outcomes. In Mekko, integrating Bajo representatives into monitoring teams helps address historical exclusion while reinforcing shared responsibility for marine resource protection.

Finally, cross-sector collaboration facilitated by local government reflects best practices in blue economy governance globally. Research highlights that multi-actor partnerships linking communities, private enterprises, NGOs, and academic institutions foster innovation, diversify livelihoods, and enhance adaptive capacity in coastal economies. Involving pearl farming companies and NGOs in community-oriented innovation initiatives can help align private sector interests with local welfare and environmental sustainability (Wirawan, 2024).

Overall, this approach repositions coastal communities as primary actors rather than passive beneficiaries of blue economy development. By embedding *gemohing* values as social capital within institutional structures, access mechanisms, and collaborative governance arrangements, the proposed model addresses key criticisms of the blue economy as technocratic and socially detached. With strong local institutions, equitable access to capital and technology, and sustained cross-sector collaboration, Mekko has the potential to serve as a replicable model for inclusive, sustainable, and culturally grounded coastal management contributing simultaneously to economic resilience, environmental conservation, and social cohesion.

CONCLUSION

This study finds that blue economy management in Mekko is characterized by a clear mismatch between high ecological potential and limited socio-economic benefits for local communities. Although the area possesses valuable coastal assets, including healthy coral reefs and high-value fisheries, their contribution to community welfare remains constrained by weak institutional capacity, fragmented stakeholder coordination, unequal access to resources, and inadequate infrastructure. These structural conditions hinder the realization of inclusive and sustainable marine governance.

Socially and culturally, the Bajo community remains marginalized in both economic participation and decision-making processes, while the Lamaholot community's *Gemohing* values represent a strong form of social capital rooted in mutual cooperation, deliberation, and equitable benefit sharing. The findings demonstrate that, when adapted beyond their traditional land-based context, *Gemohing* values can function as an effective governance mechanism in coastal and marine resource management by strengthening participation, legitimacy, and collective responsibility across indigenous and migrant groups.

The *Gemohing*-based blue economy management model proposed in this research illustrates how culturally embedded social capital can enhance community participation, support fairer benefit distribution, and contribute to the sustainability of marine ecosystems. Theoretically, these findings reinforce the importance of local socio-cultural institutions in community-

based resource management and blue economy governance. Practically, they offer relevant insights for policymakers and development actors in designing context-sensitive empowerment strategies applicable to other coastal areas with similar social structures.

This study is limited by its single-case qualitative design, which restricts broader generalization, and by its focus on social and institutional dimensions without quantitative measurement of economic or ecological impacts. Future research could address these limitations through comparative studies across multiple coastal regions, mixed-method approaches, and longitudinal assessments to evaluate the long-term effectiveness and scalability of culturally grounded blue economy models.

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