



Bridging the Gap: Community-Based Communication and Sustainability in the Development of Indonesia's New Capital, Nusantara

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Abstract: This study examines how community-based communication shapes public understanding and participation in sustainability initiatives surrounding the development of Indonesia's new capital, Nusantara. The research focuses on five partner regions in East Kalimantan: Balikpapan City, Samarinda City, Penajam Paser Utara (PPU) Regency, Kutai Kartanegara (Kukar) Regency, and Paser Regency. Using a qualitative multiple-case study design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with ten key informants, including indigenous leaders, youth representatives, community leaders, and local government public relations officials. The findings reveal that although formal communication channels, such as government events, digital platforms, and public outreach programs, are widely used to disseminate information about Nusantara's development, community understanding of sustainability narratives is largely shaped by informal, interpersonal communication networks. Social gatherings, cultural forums, and everyday community interactions function as mediating spaces that translate policy narratives into locally meaningful practices. Cross-case analysis further identifies recurring patterns of fragmented communication structures, generational differences, and tensions between centralized policy narratives and decentralized governance contexts. The study proposes community-based communication as a bridging mechanism connecting national sustainability discourse with local participatory legitimacy in large-scale development initiatives.

Keywords: Community-Based Communication, Participatory Development, Sustainability, Local Engagement, Nusantara

1. Introduction

The relocation of Indonesia's capital city from Jakarta to Ibu Kota Nusantara (IKN) represents one of the most ambitious national development projects undertaken in Southeast Asia. The new capital is envisioned as a sustainable, technologically advanced, and environmentally responsible urban center that promotes ecological resilience, technological innovation, and inclusive governance within a modern metropolitan framework (Firman, 2009). Consequently, the Nusantara project reflects Indonesia's broader ambition to redefine urban development through sustainability-oriented planning and integrated governance structures.

The relocation initiative is not merely a response to the long-standing urban challenges faced by Jakarta. For decades, the capital has experienced severe traffic congestion, rapid land subsidence, environmental degradation, population pressure, and increasing infrastructure strain (Talitha et al., 2019). These structural problems have raised concerns about the long-term viability of Jakarta as the nation's administrative center. Therefore, the decision to relocate the capital represents both a strategic response to these urban challenges and a forward-looking development strategy to redistribute economic growth across Indonesia's regions (Rogers, 2003).

Moreover, the relocation aims to stimulate sustainable development across Indonesia's vast archipelagic territory. Nusantara, located in East Kalimantan, is being constructed primarily within Penajam Paser Utara (PPU) Regency and Kutai Kartanegara (Kukar) Regency, while neighboring regions such as Balikpapan City, Samarinda City, and Paser Regency function as strategic development partners supporting the new capital. These surrounding cities and regencies play an essential role in providing infrastructure services, economic connectivity, and administrative coordination necessary for the successful implementation of the Nusantara development agenda (Talitha et al., 2019). In this context, regional collaboration becomes a crucial component of governance, as local governments are expected to coordinate the provision of infrastructure, public services, and regional planning efforts that collectively support the new capital.

However, the successful implementation of large-scale national development projects such as capital relocation cannot rely solely on physical infrastructure and institutional restructuring. Evidence from previous capital relocation experiences indicates that infrastructure development alone does not guarantee successful urban transformation. For example, studies examining the development of Brasília in Brazil and Astana in Kazakhstan demonstrate that limited public participation and insufficient community integration can lead to spatial inequality, weak legitimacy of governance, and fragmented political engagement

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(Grimes et al., 2017; Arslan, 2014). Similarly, these cases highlight that large-scale urban projects often encounter governance challenges when communication between policymakers and local communities remains insufficient or poorly structured.

These experiences emphasize that communication processes play a critical role in fostering public trust, facilitating participatory governance, and enabling inclusive decision-making in large-scale development initiatives (Rogers, 2003). Effective communication mechanisms help bridge the gap between national policy narratives and the everyday realities experienced by local communities. Consequently, communication becomes an essential instrument for cultivating legitimacy and ensuring that development policies resonate with the needs, concerns, and expectations of affected populations.

Within Indonesia's governance structure, these communication challenges become even more complex due to the country's decentralized administrative system. Since the early 2000s, Indonesia has implemented extensive decentralization reforms that have significantly strengthened local government autonomy (Talitha et al., 2019). While these reforms have enhanced regional decision-making authority, they have also generated new coordination challenges across multiple levels of governance. As a result, policy implementation frequently requires careful negotiation between national authorities, provincial administrations, and local governments (Talitha et al., 2020). Therefore, communication plays a vital role in aligning national development narratives with the lived experiences and socio-political realities of local communities.

Despite the growing body of literature on smart cities, sustainable urban development, and capital relocation, relatively limited attention has been given to the communicative dimensions of large-scale development projects (Axelsson & Granath, 2018). Existing studies tend to emphasize technological innovation, economic growth, infrastructure planning, and institutional reforms. However, these perspectives often overlook the role of communication processes in shaping community understanding, engagement, and participation in development initiatives. Consequently, an important gap remains in understanding how communication practices enable communities to interpret, negotiate, and respond to national development discourses.

Addressing this gap, the present study examines how community-based communication practices influence local perceptions and participation in sustainability-related initiatives associated with the Nusantara development project. In particular, the study focuses on the role of local actors, such as indigenous leaders, youth leaders, community representatives, and local government public relations officials, who often serve as mediators between national policy narratives and local lived experiences. Through these communicative interactions, local stakeholders help shape how communities interpret sustainability goals and engage with development initiatives (Rogers, 2003).

The study is guided by the following research question:

How does community-based communication function as a bridge between national sustainability discourses and local participatory legitimacy in shaping the development of Nusantara?

By examining communication practices across five partner regions surrounding Nusantara, this research contributes to participatory communication scholarship by extending current discussions on governance legitimacy and decentralization within the context of large-scale national development projects. Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of communication processes in facilitating community engagement, strengthening participatory governance, and supporting the social sustainability of urban transformation initiatives.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Participatory Communication in Development

Participatory communication has emerged as a central framework in development studies, emphasizing dialogue, collaboration, and community empowerment in development processes (Servaes, 2008; Freire, 1970). Unlike traditional communication models that rely on one-way dissemination of information from authorities to the public, participatory communication highlights interactive engagement between institutions and communities in shaping development outcomes (Ibuot et al., 2021; Littlejohn et al., 2017). Within this perspective, communication is understood not merely as the transmission of information but as a social process through which communities interpret, negotiate, and influence development initiatives (Han & Kim, 2021). Moreover, participatory communication recognizes that local knowledge systems and community networks function as important repositories of social experience and contextual understanding. Consequently, development initiatives that incorporate these local knowledge structures are more likely to generate sustainable and socially legitimate outcomes (Rossman, 2017). Through participatory communication practices, communities are empowered to contribute actively to decision-making processes that affect their everyday lives.

However, previous research indicates that participatory communication often unfolds within unequal power relations. Institutional communication systems frequently privilege official narratives, while community voices may receive limited recognition within formal governance processes (Littlejohn et al., 2017). As a result, participatory initiatives sometimes remain symbolic rather than substantive, particularly when communication channels are structured primarily around top-down information dissemination (Rogers, 2003). These challenges become particularly pronounced within decentralized governance contexts. In Indonesia, decentralization reforms implemented since the early 2000s have significantly expanded the authority of local governments. Nevertheless, these reforms have also introduced coordination complexities across multiple levels of governance, including national, provincial, and local administrations (Talitha et al., 2020). Consequently, gaps may emerge between national development narratives and the lived realities of local communities. Therefore, examining the communicative role of local stakeholders becomes essential for understanding how participatory engagement is constructed and negotiated in large-scale development initiatives such as the Nusantara capital project.

2.2. Communication in Smart City Development

The growing body of research on smart cities increasingly recognizes that technological infrastructure alone cannot ensure sustainable urban transformation. While digital technologies, data platforms, and intelligent infrastructure systems form important components of smart city initiatives, successful implementation also requires collaborative governance, transparent communication, and active citizen engagement (Axelsson & Granath, 2018). Consequently, communication plays a crucial role in shaping how citizens understand and interact with smart city policies and technological innovations.

Furthermore, public participation is widely acknowledged as a critical factor for enhancing the social acceptance and long-term sustainability of urban transformation initiatives (Han & Kim, 2021). When citizens are meaningfully involved in planning and decision-making processes, smart city initiatives are more likely to reflect the needs, expectations, and values of local communities. Therefore, communication strategies that facilitate dialogue between policymakers and citizens can strengthen trust and promote inclusive governance practices (Rogers, 2003). However, despite the increasing emphasis on citizen engagement, many smart city communication strategies remain predominantly top-down. Government agencies often use communication primarily as a mechanism to promote technological initiatives or policy achievements rather than as a platform for genuine community dialogue (Han & Kim, 2021). Consequently, such approaches may limit opportunities for citizens to critically engage with urban development processes or to contribute their perspectives to decision-making processes. This disconnect between official communication narratives and community experiences may weaken public trust and reduce the effectiveness of smart city initiatives.

2.3. Capital Relocation and Governance Legitimacy

Capital relocation projects are often driven by strategic political, economic, and administrative considerations. Governments may relocate capital cities to strengthen national identity, stimulate regional economic development, redistribute population pressures, or enhance administrative efficiency (Rossman, 2017). Consequently, capital relocation is frequently framed as a transformative national project designed to reshape spatial development patterns and promote long-term economic growth. However, despite these strategic objectives, capital relocation projects often encounter challenges related to governance legitimacy and public acceptance. When local communities perceive that relocation decisions are imposed without meaningful consultation or participation, tensions may arise between national development agendas and local interests (Rogers, 2003). Such tensions can undermine the legitimacy of development initiatives and generate resistance among affected communities.

Empirical studies of capital relocation cases such as Brasília in Brazil and Astana in Kazakhstan illustrate these challenges. Research indicates that limited community participation during the planning and implementation phases contributed to spatial inequalities, social segregation, and fragmented patterns of political participation (Grimes et al., 2017; Arslan, 2014). Similarly, these experiences demonstrate that large-scale urban transformation projects require not only institutional coordination and infrastructure development but also effective communication strategies that foster public trust and inclusive governance. Within decentralized governance systems, these challenges become even more complex. Multiple levels of government often share responsibilities for policy implementation, which may create coordination difficulties and communication gaps between national authorities and local administrations (Rogers, 2003). Therefore, governance legitimacy in capital relocation projects depends not only on institutional capacity but also on the effectiveness of communication mechanisms that facilitate dialogue between policymakers and local communities. Building upon these perspectives, the present study advances the concept of community-based communication as a mechanism for connecting institutional governance narratives with local participatory legitimacy. Through this lens, communication practices function as mediating processes that help align national policy objectives with local expectations and experiences.

2.4. Community-Based Communication in Practice

Community-based communication emphasizes the active involvement of local stakeholders in shaping development discourse and facilitating dialogue between government institutions and local communities. Local actors, including indigenous leaders, youth organizations, community representatives, and local government officials, often play an important role in translating national development narratives into locally meaningful practices (Ibuot et al., 2021; Zhou et al., 2023). Consequently, these actors function as intermediaries who help bridge the gap between formal policy frameworks and community-level experiences. For instance, local initiatives in regions surrounding the Nusantara development area illustrate how community-based communication practices can support sustainability goals. In Balikpapan, community-led activities such as mangrove restoration programs and environmental education initiatives serve as practical examples of how sustainability messages can be translated into concrete community actions (Han & Kim, 2021). These initiatives demonstrate how environmental communication can strengthen local engagement with broader sustainability agendas.

Similarly, in regions such as Paser and Penajam Paser Utara (PPU), culturally embedded communication practices play a significant role in facilitating dialogue between government institutions and local communities. Community gatherings, village meetings, traditional ceremonies, and religious events often function as important communication spaces where development initiatives are discussed, interpreted, and negotiated (Indonesian Ministry of National Development Planning, 2021). Through these culturally embedded communication channels, local communities are able to express concerns, exchange information, and build mutual understanding regarding development policies. These examples illustrate that community-based communication extends beyond simple information dissemination. Rather, it represents a collaborative process through which communities interpret, evaluate, and adapt national development objectives according to their cultural values, social structures, and local capacities (Ibuot et al., 2021; Axelsson & Granath, 2018). Consequently, participatory communication processes contribute to strengthening governance legitimacy by fostering dialogue, trust, and collective ownership of development initiatives.

In decentralized governance contexts such as Indonesia, these communication practices become particularly significant. By facilitating dialogue between national policy narratives and local experiences, community-based communication can support more inclusive and socially legitimate development processes.

2.5. Theoretical Framework and Research Propositions

This study draws on participatory communication theory, governance legitimacy, and sustainability communication in smart city development to explain how communication processes influence community engagement in the Nusantara capital project. These perspectives help explain how national development narratives are interpreted and negotiated within local communities. Participatory communication theory emphasizes dialogue, collaboration, and community empowerment in development processes. Unlike traditional communication models that rely on one-way information dissemination, participatory approaches encourage interaction between institutions and communities in shaping development initiatives (Ibuot et al., 2021; Littlejohn et al., 2017). However, communication in large-scale development projects often remains dominated by institutional narratives controlled by government authorities.

The concept of governance legitimacy further suggests that development initiatives gain public acceptance when communities perceive communication processes as inclusive and responsive to local concerns (Rossman, 2017). In contrast, limited participation can weaken public trust and generate tensions between national policy narratives and local realities. These challenges are particularly evident in decentralized governance contexts where multiple institutional levels interact (Talitha et al., 2020). Research on smart cities and sustainability communication also highlights that technological development alone cannot ensure sustainable urban transformation. Instead, effective communication mechanisms are required to connect policy narratives with community participation (Axelsson & Granath, 2018; Han & Kim, 2021). Building on these perspectives, this study conceptualizes community-based communication as a bridging mechanism that connects institutional sustainability narratives with local participatory engagement. Local actors such as community leaders, youth groups, and indigenous representatives play an important role in translating national development messages into locally meaningful discussions and practices.

Based on this framework, the study proposes the following research propositions:

Proposition 1: Communication surrounding large-scale development initiatives is often structured through top-down institutional channels.

Proposition 2: Community-based communication enables local actors to reinterpret national development narratives in locally meaningful ways.

Proposition 3: Inclusive communication processes contribute to strengthening governance legitimacy in large-scale development projects.

Proposition 4: Informal and culturally embedded communication networks play an important role in mediating institutional communication and community participation.

3. Research Method

To examine communication dynamics surrounding the development of Ibu Kota Nusantara (IKN) from the perspective of surrounding partner regions in East Kalimantan, this study adopted a qualitative multiple-case study design. Qualitative approaches are particularly suitable for exploring complex social processes, perceptions, and interactions within specific contexts, especially when the objective is to understand how individuals interpret and experience a phenomenon (Bappenas, 2020). In this study, the qualitative design allowed the researchers to capture diverse perspectives regarding communication practices, governance interactions, and community engagement associated with the Nusantara development project.

The study focused on five strategic partner regions that play a significant role in supporting the Nusantara development ecosystem, namely Samarinda City, Balikpapan City, Penajam Paser Utara (PPU) Regency, Kutai Kartanegara (Kukar) Regency, and Paser Regency. Each of these regions contributes to the development of Nusantara through infrastructure support, administrative coordination, and community engagement initiatives. Therefore, examining communication practices within these areas provides valuable insights into how national development narratives are interpreted and communicated at the regional and community levels. A multiple-case study approach was adopted to explore similarities and differences across several contexts while maintaining the depth of qualitative inquiry (Han & Kim, 2021). By examining communication dynamics across multiple regional cases, the study aimed to identify patterns of interaction between government institutions and local communities in relation to the sustainability discourse surrounding Nusantara.

3.1. Informant Selection

Purposive sampling was employed to select informants with direct knowledge and practical experience of community communication processes surrounding the Nusantara development initiative. Purposive sampling is widely used in qualitative research when participants are selected based on their ability to provide relevant and information-rich perspectives regarding the research topic (Rogers, 2003). A total of ten informants were selected across the five regional cases included in this study. Each case represented one regency or city, and two informants were recruited from each location. This structure enabled the study to capture both institutional and community perspectives regarding communication practices related to Nusantara development.

The first informant in each case represented the local government, specifically officials from the Public Relations and Protocol divisions of the respective city or regency governments. These officials were selected because they play a central role in disseminating information, managing public communication strategies, and coordinating government messaging regarding development initiatives. The second informant in each case represented the local community. Community informants included individuals with recognized social roles such as community leaders, youth leaders, or traditional leaders who are actively involved in local communication networks. These individuals were selected because they often function as mediators between government institutions and community members, facilitating dialogue and information exchange at the grassroots level.

By incorporating both government representatives and community stakeholders, the study aimed to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of how communication processes operate across different institutional and social contexts. Furthermore, this dual perspective allowed the research to explore potential gaps, alignments, or tensions between official development narratives and community-level interpretations of Nusantara's sustainability agenda.

3.2. Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which enabled participants to provide detailed insights regarding their experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of communication practices related to the Nusantara development project. Semi-structured interviews are particularly useful in qualitative research because they allow researchers to explore predetermined themes while simultaneously providing flexibility for participants to elaborate on emerging issues (Tufte & Mefalopulos, 2009).

The interview protocol consisted of open-ended questions organized around three main thematic areas. First, the interviews explored community perceptions of Nusantara's sustainability narrative, focusing on how local communities understand and interpret the concept of a sustainable capital city and how these ideas are communicated within local contexts.

Second, the interviews examined the accessibility and inclusiveness of government communication, including the mechanisms through which information about Nusantara is disseminated and the extent to which communication channels effectively reach different segments of the population. Third, the interviews investigated the role of local actors in facilitating communication between government authorities and community members, particularly in translating policy messages into locally meaningful discourse.

Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and was conducted either in person or through online communication platforms, depending on the availability and preferences of the informants. Prior to the interviews, participants were informed about the purpose of the study and provided consent for participation. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' permission in order to ensure accurate documentation of the discussions. Subsequently, the recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim, allowing the researchers to capture participants' responses in detail and maintain the authenticity of the data. Verbatim transcription also facilitated systematic analysis by preserving the original meanings and expressions articulated by the informants.

3.3. Data Analysis

The interview data obtained from the ten informants across the five cases were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. Thematic analysis is a widely used qualitative method that allows researchers to identify, analyze, and interpret patterns of meaning within textual data (Talitha, Firman, & Hudalah, 2019). The analysis process began with data familiarization, during which the researchers repeatedly reviewed the interview transcripts to gain a comprehensive understanding of the participants' responses. This stage involved careful reading and reflection in order to identify key ideas, recurring concepts, and significant statements related to the research objectives.

Following familiarization, the researchers conducted initial coding, in which meaningful segments of the transcripts were assigned descriptive labels that reflected the content of the participants' responses. These codes represented preliminary analytical categories that captured important aspects of communication practices, perceptions, and experiences associated with the Nusantara development initiative. Subsequently, the study employed cross-case analysis to compare findings across the five regional contexts. Cross-case analysis enabled the researchers to examine similarities, differences, and recurring patterns among the cases, particularly regarding how government officials and community representatives interpreted and experienced communication processes related to Nusantara development (Tufte & Mefalopoulos, 2009). This comparative approach provided a broader understanding of communication dynamics across multiple institutional and community settings.

In the final stage of analysis, related codes were grouped into broader analytical categories and thematic patterns that addressed the central research question. These themes were interpreted in relation to the theoretical perspectives discussed in the literature review, thereby linking empirical findings with broader debates on participatory communication, governance legitimacy, and sustainable urban development. To enhance analytical credibility, representative quotations from interview transcripts were included in the findings section. These quotations provide direct insights into participants' perspectives and help illustrate how communication practices are experienced and interpreted by different stakeholders involved in the Nusantara development process.

4. Findings

The analysis of interview data obtained from ten key informants across five partner regions, Samarinda, Balikpapan, Penajam Paser Utara (PPU), Kutai Kartanegara (Kukar), and Paser, revealed several important communication dynamics shaping community engagement in the development of Nusantara. Although the socio-political conditions, geographic contexts, and administrative capacities differ across these regions, the findings demonstrate recurring patterns in how communication surrounding Nusantara development is constructed, disseminated, and interpreted at the local level.

The thematic analysis identified four major patterns in the communication dynamics associated with Nusantara development:

1. the predominance of top-down institutional communication,
2. community-based translation of sustainability narratives,
3. communication gaps in indigenous participation, and
4. The role of informal communication networks in peripheral regions.

These themes illustrate how communication processes mediate the relationship between national development narratives and local community interpretations.

4.1. The Predominance of Top-Down Institutional Communication

Across the five regions examined in this study, both government public relations officials and community representatives consistently reported that communication regarding the Nusantara development initiative is largely structured through institutional channels led by national and local government authorities. Government officials responsible for public communication emphasized that these channels are primarily designed to disseminate official information concerning infrastructure development, environmental sustainability programs, and economic opportunities associated with the establishment of the new capital.

Informants from the public relations divisions in Samarinda and Balikpapan highlighted that digital communication platforms have increasingly become the primary medium through which updates on Nusantara development are communicated to the public. According to these informants, official government websites, social media platforms, and online news portals serve as key sources for disseminating information related to infrastructure development, environmental sustainability initiatives, and broader development progress associated with the new capital. Government actors indicated that these communication channels are intended to enhance transparency, inform the public, and reinforce the national narrative that presents Nusantara as a model of green and inclusive urban development.

From the perspective of community and youth leaders in these regions, such digital communication platforms are indeed visible and accessible. Community informants acknowledged that information about development activities is frequently circulated through these official channels. However, they also observed that the communication process rarely provides opportunities for community members to express their views or influence development planning processes. A similar pattern emerged in Penajam Paser Utara (PPU), where the new capital administrative center is located. Public relations officials reported that government institutions conduct a variety of outreach activities intended to inform local communities about the progress of Nusantara development. These activities include public briefings, official events, community outreach programs, and informational meetings organized by government agencies. According to government representatives, these initiatives are designed to increase public awareness of development progress and to communicate the potential economic opportunities associated with the relocation of the capital.

However, community representatives in PPU expressed a somewhat different interpretation of these outreach activities. A local community leader noted that such events often function primarily as informational sessions rather than participatory forums. While communities receive updates regarding development policies and project implementation, opportunities for community members to actively contribute to planning discussions or decision-making processes appear to be limited. Comparable communication patterns were also reported in Kutai Kartanegara (Kukar) and Paser. Government public relations officials in these regions explained that official information regarding Nusantara development is disseminated through institutional mechanisms such as media briefings, official statements, and coordination with local media outlets. These communication efforts are intended to maintain public awareness and ensure that communities remain informed about ongoing development activities.

Nevertheless, community and youth leaders from these regions similarly indicated that direct interaction between community members and government authorities remains relatively limited. Although information about Nusantara development is regularly distributed, communication processes are often perceived as one-directional rather than dialogical. Taken together, the perspectives shared by both government and community informants across the five regions suggest that communication surrounding Nusantara development is predominantly structured as an institutional information dissemination process. Government actors emphasize transparency and public awareness as primary communication objectives. However, community members frequently perceive these communication mechanisms as largely one-way flows of information, in which government institutions define and transmit development narratives while opportunities for sustained dialogue or participatory engagement remain relatively limited. Consequently, the findings indicate that communication practices related to major national development initiatives such as Nusantara continue to operate largely through top-down institutional structures. Within this framework, government authorities retain significant control over how development narratives are constructed and communicated to the broader public.

4.2. Community-Based Translation of Sustainability Narratives

Although institutional communication surrounding the Nusantara development is predominantly structured through top-down channels, communities across several regions have developed their own mechanisms for interpreting and translating sustainability narratives into practical grassroots initiatives. Informants from both government public relations offices and local communities noted that official narratives surrounding Nusantara frequently emphasize environmental sustainability, green infrastructure, and ecological resilience. However, these narratives are often interpreted and operationalized through community-driven activities rather than through formal government programs.

This dynamic is particularly evident in Balikpapan and Samarinda, where youth groups and local civil society organizations play an active role in promoting environmental awareness associated with Nusantara's development. Government public relations officials in Balikpapan explained that official communication campaigns frequently portray the city as a strategic supporting urban center for the new capital, highlighting initiatives related to environmental protection, conservation programs, and sustainable urban development. Through these campaigns, local authorities seek to position Balikpapan as a model of environmental resilience that complements the broader sustainability vision of Nusantara.

However, community and youth leaders indicated that meaningful engagement with sustainability narratives often emerges from community initiatives rather than formal government messaging. For example, youth-led organizations in Balikpapan frequently organize activities such as mangrove restoration, coastal clean-up programs, waste management campaigns, and environmental awareness initiatives. These activities translate broader sustainability narratives associated with Nusantara into tangible actions that directly involve local residents. A comparable pattern was observed in Samarinda, where youth groups and civil society organizations actively utilize digital platforms to disseminate information and raise awareness regarding sustainability issues linked to Nusantara development. Informants reported that social media discussions, community forums, and locally organized environmental campaigns have emerged as alternative spaces where sustainability narratives are interpreted, debated, and adapted to local contexts.

Similarly, in Penajam Paser Utara (PPU), the administrative center of the new capital, community leaders noted that discussions concerning sustainability increasingly occur within local community initiatives and youth forums. While government communication efforts primarily focus on informing residents about development progress and environmental planning, community groups frequently reinterpret these narratives through localized discussions, collective activities, and environmental awareness initiatives that prepare communities for the social and ecological implications of the capital relocation. In Kutai Kartanegara (Kukar), indigenous leaders reported that community organizations and local youth groups are actively involved in connecting national sustainability narratives with local environmental concerns. These efforts often take the form of community-based environmental campaigns and indigenous community discussions that emphasize locally relevant ecological issues. Although these initiatives are generally less formal than official government programs, they provide opportunities for communities to engage with development narratives in ways that are meaningful within their cultural and environmental contexts.

A somewhat different pattern emerged in Paser, where institutional communication regarding Nusantara development appears less visible. In this region, community engagement with sustainability narratives frequently occurs through informal activities organized by local leaders and community groups. Youth leaders reported that these initiatives often integrate sustainability concepts with existing cultural practices and local ecological knowledge. Consequently, national development

narratives are interpreted through the lens of local livelihoods, environmental traditions, and community values. Across all five regions, informants emphasized that community-based initiatives function as important intermediaries between institutional communication and community participation. By translating abstract policy narratives into locally relevant discussions and practices, community organizations contribute to making national sustainability agendas more accessible and meaningful at the grassroots level. Therefore, grassroots communication practices play a significant role in shaping how communities understand and engage with the broader development discourse surrounding Nusantara.

4.3. Communication Gaps in Indigenous Participation

Another important finding emerging from the study concerns the limited participation of indigenous communities within formal communication processes related to Nusantara development. This issue was particularly emphasized by community and indigenous informants in Penajam Paser Utara (PPU) and Kutai Kartanegara (Kukar), where development activities associated with the new capital intersect directly with traditional land-use systems and indigenous territories. Government public relations officials in PPU reported that various communication activities, such as public briefings, official announcements, and outreach programs, are conducted to inform residents about infrastructure development and potential economic opportunities associated with the capital relocation. According to government representatives, these initiatives are designed to enhance public awareness and ensure that communities remain informed about ongoing development processes.

However, indigenous community representatives expressed concerns regarding the timing and structure of these communication processes. Several informants noted that community engagement often occurs only after major policy decisions have already been made. Consequently, indigenous groups frequently perceive their involvement as consultative rather than participatory. An indigenous leader explained that opportunities for indigenous communities to influence decisions related to land use, environmental management, and cultural preservation remain limited within formal institutional communication frameworks. Although these concerns were most prominent in PPU and Kukar, similar observations were reported by informants in Samarinda and Balikpapan. Community representatives from these urban areas indicated that formal communication regarding Nusantara development tends to prioritize institutional messaging and policy updates. As a result, indigenous perspectives and traditional knowledge systems are not consistently incorporated into development discussions.

In Paser, where communities maintain strong cultural connections to land and natural resource management practices, community informants raised comparable concerns regarding the limited representation of local voices in formal development communication processes. In many cases, discussions concerning the implications of Nusantara development occur primarily through community-led gatherings rather than government-driven consultation forums. Across several regions included in the study, indigenous leaders reported organizing discussions through village meetings, customary gatherings, and community forums in order to collectively interpret and evaluate the potential social, environmental, and cultural impacts of the capital relocation. These spaces enable community members to exchange perspectives, express concerns, and reflect on the implications of development policies within their local contexts.

Informants emphasized that meaningful engagement with indigenous communities requires consultation processes that acknowledge customary governance systems, traditional knowledge frameworks, and culturally embedded decision-making practices. Without such recognition, formal communication processes risk marginalizing indigenous perspectives and limiting opportunities for communities to participate meaningfully in development planning. Consequently, informal community dialogues and traditional leadership structures continue to serve as critical spaces through which indigenous communities interpret development narratives and articulate their concerns regarding the future of their territories.

4.4. Informal Communication Networks in Peripheral Regions

The findings also highlight the significant role of informal communication networks in shaping community engagement with Nusantara development, particularly in regions where formal communication mechanisms are less accessible or less participatory. Across several study locations, community leaders indicated that informal social networks frequently function as alternative channels for discussing development issues and interpreting government policies. In Penajam Paser Utara (PPU), for example, community leaders observed that discussions regarding Nusantara development often take place through local social gatherings, neighborhood meetings, and informal community conversations. While official communication activities provide general information regarding development progress, local residents frequently rely on informal networks to exchange interpretations and evaluate the potential implications of policy decisions.

Similarly, in Kutai Kartanegara (Kukar), indigenous communities continue to rely on traditional governance structures and customary communication practices when discussing development issues. Indigenous leaders noted that these informal communication channels allow community members to collectively interpret government announcements and assess how development initiatives may affect their land, environment, and cultural traditions. Informants from Samarinda and Balikpapan also acknowledged that informal communication networks play an important role in shaping community understanding of Nusantara development. Although official communication channels remain active in these urban contexts, many residents continue to rely on community discussions, social networks, and local organizations to interpret development narratives and share information within their social circles.

In Paser, where communities maintain strong cultural ties to traditional ecological practices, youth leaders reported that discussions concerning Nusantara development frequently occur through village gatherings, customary meetings, and youth-led community forums. These informal spaces provide opportunities for community members to collectively discuss development policies, share concerns, and explore potential social and environmental impacts. Informants emphasized that these informal communication networks are particularly valuable because they allow community members to interpret development narratives within locally meaningful social and cultural contexts. Through these networks, individuals can exchange perspectives, build shared understandings, and collectively evaluate the implications of large-scale development initiatives. Consequently, informal communication networks function as important complementary mechanisms that support community dialogue in situations where formal communication processes remain limited or predominantly one-directional. These networks enable local communities to actively engage with development narratives and contribute to ongoing discussions regarding the future of their regions within the broader Nusantara development framework.

5. Discussion

This study reveals complex communication dynamics shaping community engagement in the development of Ibu Kota Nusantara (IKN) across Samarinda, Balikpapan, Penajam Paser Utara (PPU), Paser, and Kutai Kartanegara (Kukar). Drawing on perspectives from government public relations officials and community stakeholders, the findings illustrate how institutional communication structures interact with local interpretations of development narratives. These dynamics can be understood through the perspectives of development communication, participatory communication, and culturally embedded communication systems.

First, the findings indicate that communication surrounding Nusantara's development is largely structured through institutional communication channels controlled by government authorities. Information regarding infrastructure development, sustainability initiatives, and economic opportunities is primarily disseminated through official media briefings, government websites, and social media platforms. This reflects the traditional top-down communication model frequently discussed in development communication literature, where information flows from institutions to the public (Talitha, Firman, & Hudalah, 2019; Axelsson & Granath, 2018). However, participatory communication theory suggests that development communication should promote dialogue and collaboration rather than merely transmitting information (Ibuot et al., 2021; Littlejohn et al., 2017). The findings indicate that although institutional communication aims to increase transparency, opportunities for meaningful community dialogue remain limited. Similarly, research on smart city communication shows that large-scale urban projects often prioritize government messaging and technological narratives over citizen participation (Axelsson & Granath, 2018; Han & Kim, 2021).

Second, the findings show that communities actively reinterpret sustainability narratives through grassroots initiatives. While official communication presents Nusantara as a model of green and sustainable development, local actors translate these narratives into practical community activities such as mangrove restoration, coastal clean-up campaigns, waste management initiatives, and environmental awareness programs. These initiatives, particularly visible in Balikpapan and Samarinda, illustrate how community actors function as intermediaries who adapt national policy narratives to local environmental and social contexts (Ibuot et al., 2021; Zhou et al., 2023). Therefore, communities act not only as recipients of institutional communication but also as interpreters of development discourse (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011; Freire, 1970; Tufte & Mefalopulos, 2009).

Third, the study identifies limited indigenous participation in formal communication processes, especially in PPU and Kukar, where development overlaps with customary land systems. Informants indicated that communication with indigenous communities often occurs after key policy decisions have been made. Consequently, participation is frequently perceived as consultative rather than participatory, particularly in issues related to land use, environmental governance, and cultural preservation. Similar concerns have been observed in research on large-scale development projects, which suggests that limited consultation can weaken governance legitimacy and public trust (Rossman, 2017; Grimes et al., 2017; Arslan, 2014). These challenges may become more complex in decentralized governance contexts where coordination between national and local actors remains uneven (Talitha et al., 2020).

Finally, the findings highlight the role of informal and culturally embedded communication networks in shaping how communities interpret development narratives. Across the study regions, discussions about Nusantara frequently occur through village meetings, customary gatherings, youth forums, and informal social networks. These communication spaces enable communities to interpret development policies within their cultural and social contexts. Consequently, informal communication networks function as important mechanisms that connect institutional development narratives with community-level understanding (Rogers, 2003; Servaes, 2008). Overall, the findings suggest that effective communication in large-scale development initiatives requires a balance between institutional communication strategies and locally embedded participatory practices. Recognizing and engaging with community-based communication networks may therefore strengthen participatory governance and improve the social legitimacy of Nusantara's development.

6. Conclusion

This study examines the communication dynamics surrounding the development of Ibu Kota Nusantara (IKN) within Indonesia's decentralized governance framework. The findings indicate that communication related to Nusantara remains largely structured through institutional, top-down channels led by government authorities. However, local communities actively reinterpret sustainability narratives through grassroots initiatives, informal networks, and culturally embedded communication practices. These dynamics demonstrate that the effectiveness of large-scale development initiatives depends not only on infrastructure and policy frameworks but also on inclusive communication processes that connect national narratives with local experiences.

The study contributes to the literature on participatory communication, governance legitimacy, and sustainable urban development. First, the findings support participatory communication theory by showing that communities do not passively receive institutional information but instead reinterpret development narratives through locally meaningful practices. Second, the results highlight the importance of local actors, including community leaders, youth groups, and indigenous representatives, in strengthening the legitimacy of governance by translating national development goals into socially relevant initiatives. Third, the study demonstrates that smart and sustainable city development requires communication strategies that balance formal policy dissemination with informal community-based communication networks.

From a practical perspective, policymakers involved in Nusantara's development should prioritize locally grounded communication strategies that encourage dialogue and participation. Mechanisms such as community forums, inclusive consultation processes, and locally facilitated outreach programs may strengthen public trust and enhance community engagement in the development process. Ultimately, Nusantara's ambition to become a smart and sustainable capital depends not only on technological innovation or infrastructure development but also on the ability to foster participatory communication between government institutions and local communities. By integrating national development visions with community-based communication practices, Nusantara has the potential to serve as a model for inclusive and socially responsive urban transformation.

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