

The Role of Community Self-Help Communication as an Agent of Change in Village Community Empowerment in North Sumatra Province

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Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis komunikasi PSM sebagai agen perubahan dalam pemberdayaan masyarakat perdesaan di Provinsi Sumatera Utara, serta mengidentifikasi peluang dan tantangan yang dihadapi dalam menjalankan perannya. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan paradigma konstruktivis. Data diperoleh melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi, diskusi kelompok terarah (FGD), dan dokumentasi. Informan penelitian terdiri dari pejabat struktural dan pejabat fungsional PSM yang dipilih menggunakan teknik *snowball sampling*. Analisis data dilakukan menggunakan model interaktif Miles, Huberman, dan Saldaña melalui tahapan kondensasi data, penyajian data, dan penarikan kesimpulan. Validitas data diuji melalui triangulasi sumber. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa komunikasi PSM sebagai agen perubahan dilakukan melalui pemahaman informasi dan kebijakan pemberdayaan, adaptasi dan pembelajaran mandiri, komunikasi partisipatif dan dialogis, pembangunan kepercayaan masyarakat, peran sebagai fasilitator dan mediator sosial, serta pemanfaatan budaya lokal dan teknologi komunikasi. Penelitian ini juga mengidentifikasi peluang dan tantangan yang dihadapi PSM dalam menjalankan perannya. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa komunikasi PSM ditentukan oleh kemampuan mengintegrasikan komunikasi pembangunan partisipatif, difusi inovasi, dan pemberdayaan masyarakat dalam konteks sosial-budaya masyarakat perdesaan di Provinsi Sumatera Utara. Penelitian ini merekomendasikan penguatan kapasitas komunikasi PSM, pengurangan beban administratif, dan pengembangan strategi komunikasi yang adaptif terhadap karakteristik masyarakat multikultural.

Keywords: Komunikasi Pembangunan, Penggerak Swadaya Masyarakat (PSM), Agen Perubahan, Pemberdayaan Masyarakat, Desa

Abstract

This study aims to analyze the communication of PSM as an agent of change in empowering rural communities in North Sumatra Province, and to identify the opportunities and challenges faced in implementing its role. This study uses a qualitative approach with a constructivist paradigm. Data were obtained through in-depth interviews, observations, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), and documentation. Research informants consisted of Structural Officials and Functional Positions of PSM selected using the snowball sampling technique. Data analysis was conducted using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña through the stages of data condensation, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. Data validity was tested through source triangulation. The results show that PSM communication as an agent of change is carried out through understanding information and empowerment policies, adaptation and self-learning, participatory and dialogic communication, building community trust, acting as a facilitator and social mediator, and utilizing local culture and communication technology. This study also identified opportunities and challenges faced by PSM in carrying out its role. This study concludes that PSM communication is determined by the ability to integrate participatory development communication, innovation diffusion, and community empowerment within the socio-cultural context of rural communities in North Sumatra Province. This study recommends strengthening PSM communication capacity, reducing administrative burdens, and developing communication strategies that are adaptive to the characteristics of multicultural societies.

Keywords: Development Communication, Community Self-Help Activator, Agent of Change, Community Empowerment, Village

Introduction

Village development is a strategic component of Indonesia's national development agenda because villages are not merely administrative units, but also socio-cultural, economic, and political spaces where public policy is directly experienced by citizens. Since the enactment of Law Number 6 of 2014 concerning Villages, Indonesia's village development policy has shifted from a state-centered model toward a more village-centered and community-based approach. This legal framework strengthens village governance, development, community empowerment, and institutional autonomy, thereby positioning rural communities as active subjects of development rather than passive objects of government intervention (Republic of Indonesia, 2014). Nevertheless, the implementation of village development policy continues to face serious challenges, particularly in regions characterized by wide geographical coverage, social diversity, unequal institutional capacity, and varying levels of community participation.

North Sumatra Province provides an important empirical context for examining these challenges. The province has 5,417 villages distributed across 27 regencies and 693 urban villages across 33 regencies/cities. These villages are located in diverse geographical areas, including coastal zones, islands, mountainous regions, agricultural areas, plantation zones, and tourism-oriented regions. Such diversity creates different patterns of livelihood, infrastructure access, institutional capacity, and communication practices among village communities (Humaizi et al., 2024; Indainanto et al., 2023). Therefore, village development in North Sumatra cannot be understood as a uniform administrative process. Rather, it must be analyzed as a contextual and communicative process shaped by local resources, cultural systems, community leadership, public participation, and the ability of development actors to build trust and collective action (Harianto et al., 2023; Ohorella et al., 2023).

The 2024 Village Development Index shows that village development in North Sumatra still reflects significant inequality. Out of 5,417 villages, only 168 are categorized as independent villages, 964 as advanced villages, 2,964 as developing villages, 872 as disadvantaged villages, and 449 as very disadvantaged villages (Ministry of Villages, Development of Disadvantaged Regions, and Transmigration, 2024; Office of Community and Village Empowerment, Population, and Civil Registration of North Sumatra Province, 2024). These figures indicate that most villages remain in the developing category, while more than one thousand villages are still disadvantaged or very disadvantaged. Development disparities are also visible among regencies. South Nias and Mandailing Natal still have many disadvantaged and very disadvantaged villages, while Serdang Bedagai, Deli Serdang, and Langkat show stronger progress in the number of independent villages. This uneven distribution indicates that village development is influenced not only by fiscal support, but also by

institutional performance, geographical accessibility, social capital, leadership, and community participation (Fauzan et al., 2023).

The development of village economic institutions also shows the need for sustained empowerment. In 2024, North Sumatra had 3,146 Village-Owned Enterprises (BUM Desa) out of 5,417 villages. However, most of these enterprises were still in early stages of development: 1,828 were categorized as pioneering, 1,110 as beginner-level, 186 as developing, and only 22 as advanced (Office of Community and Village Empowerment, Population, and Civil Registration of North Sumatra Province, 2024). This condition shows that the establishment of village economic institutions does not automatically produce strong economic governance or sustainable rural entrepreneurship. Many BUM Desa still require institutional strengthening, managerial capacity, financial literacy, business planning, market access, and community trust. Thus, empowerment must be understood not only as the formation of institutions, but also as a communicative process that enables village actors to understand institutional functions, participate in decision-making, and manage local economic potential collectively.

Fiscal support for village development has also been substantial. The accumulated allocation of Village Funds received by North Sumatra during the 2015–2025 period reached approximately IDR 42.8 trillion (Office of Community and Village Empowerment, Population, and Civil Registration of North Sumatra Province, 2024). This large budget allocation reflects the government's commitment to accelerating rural development and improving welfare. However, financial resources alone do not guarantee equitable outcomes. Problems remain in human resource capacity, institutional governance, community participation, administrative dominance, innovation, and community-based monitoring. Therefore, the success of village development depends not only on the amount of budget allocated, but also on how development programs are communicated, negotiated, implemented, and evaluated with community involvement.

Community empowerment in North Sumatra is also urgent because rural poverty and welfare inequality remain important development issues. BPS-Statistics of Sumatera Utara Province reports that poverty continues to be a relevant problem in the province, with differences between urban and rural conditions (BPS-Statistics of Sumatera Utara Province, 2025). Although North Sumatra has strong village potential in agriculture, plantations, fisheries, tourism, and creative economy sectors, such potential does not automatically become community welfare. Local resources require social capacity, institutional readiness, market connectivity, and participatory empowerment. Therefore, village development must not focus only on infrastructure, but also on strengthening people's ability to identify opportunities, organize collective action, and manage local resources independently.

Community participation is a central principle in village empowerment. Participation should include involvement in identifying problems, formulating priorities, planning programs, making decisions, implementing activities, monitoring outcomes, and evaluating results. However, many village development programs still experience low levels of meaningful participation. Participation is often symbolic, formalistic, or limited to attendance in village meetings without real influence over decision-making. Damayanti and Syarifuddin (2020) argue that inclusiveness in village development planning remains a serious issue because community involvement can become pseudo-participation when people are formally included but lack actual power to shape decisions. This condition is relevant in North Sumatra, where participation must be understood not merely as administrative attendance, but as communicative agency.

The problem of participation is closely related to development communication. Development communication is not simply the transmission of government information to rural communities, but a dialogical process that enables the exchange of ideas, collective learning, consensus-building, social negotiation, and community involvement in social change (Servaes, 2020). Participatory development communication views communities as active actors who interpret, question, adapt, and reshape development ideas according to their social realities. This perspective is especially important in North Sumatra's multicultural context, where communities such as Batak Toba, Karo, Mandailing, Simalungun, Pakpak, Malay, Nias, Javanese, and Minangkabau have different values, norms, customary leadership, communication patterns, and deliberation mechanisms. Cultural systems such as *Dalihan Na Tolu* and other traditional consensus mechanisms influence how communities communicate, negotiate, accept new ideas, and make collective decisions.

One strategic actor in village community empowerment is the Community Self-Help Facilitator, known in Indonesia as *Penggerak Swadaya Masyarakat* (PSM). Based on Regulation of the National Civil Service Agency Number 39 of 2019, PSM is a functional civil service position related to facilitation, counseling, training, mentoring, and strengthening community participation (National Civil Service Agency, 2019). PSM is not merely an administrative apparatus, but also a development communicator who connects government institutions with village communities. Through direct interaction with residents, village officials, community groups, and local institutions, PSM explains programs, facilitates discussion, motivates participation, mediates interests, and strengthens local capacity. This position places PSM as an agent of change in village empowerment.

The role of PSM as an agent of change is closely related to the diffusion of innovations theory. Rogers (2003) explains that social change occurs through the diffusion of ideas,

practices, or innovations introduced by actors who communicate within a social system. In village development, PSM may introduce new ideas about community organization, village economic management, participatory planning, local entrepreneurship, institutional governance, digital administration, and sustainable resource management. However, this role depends heavily on communication competence. PSM must be able to translate technical development concepts into language understood by villagers, adapt messages to local culture, respond to community concerns, and build trust among actors with different interests.

Previous studies show that PSM has an important role in community empowerment, but its implementation still faces obstacles. Hanafie (2020) found that PSM optimization is constrained by limited competence, inappropriate placement, and weak institutional support. Kurniawan and Febrian (2025) also found that PSM contributes to socialization, entrepreneurship training, village deliberation, and empowerment, but is limited by low participation, inadequate facilities, and weak stakeholder synergy. Existing studies tend to view PSM from institutional or administrative perspectives, while communication-based studies remain limited. Therefore, this study examines the communication role of PSM as an agent of change in village community empowerment in North Sumatra Province. Its novelty lies in shifting the analysis of PSM from an administrative perspective to a development communication perspective, emphasizing how PSM builds awareness, participation, trust, behavioral change, and community independence in a multicultural rural context.

Methods

This study used a qualitative research method with a descriptive approach to examine the communication role of Community Self-Help Facilitators, known in Indonesia as *Penggerak Swadaya Masyarakat* (PSM), in village community empowerment in North Sumatra Province. The qualitative method was selected because the study aimed to understand social processes, meanings, experiences, and interactions related to the role of PSM, rather than measuring the phenomenon statistically. Qualitative research enables researchers to explore social realities naturally and contextually based on the perspectives of participants (Creswell, 2016). In this study, PSM was understood as a social and communicative actor whose role is shaped by institutional mandates, field experience, local values, and direct interaction with village communities (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The descriptive approach was used to explain systematically how PSM performs its role as facilitator, companion, educator, motivator, mediator, institutional strengthening actor, and agent of change in community empowerment practices (Sugiyono, 2021).

The focus of the study was developed based on the normative duties of PSM as regulated

in Regulation of the National Civil Service Agency Number 39 of 2019 concerning the functional position of Community Self-Help Facilitator. This regulation defines PSM as a functional civil service position responsible for community facilitation, counseling, training, mentoring, institutional strengthening, monitoring, evaluation, and the promotion of community participation (BKN, 2019). Therefore, this study examined not only the formal role of PSM but also the opportunities and challenges they face in implementing empowerment programs, including limited resources, low community awareness, cultural barriers, administrative burdens, and structural constraints in village governance. These aspects are important because previous studies show that the optimization of PSM roles is often constrained by limited competence, weak institutional support, and complex field conditions (Dianto, 2018; Hanafie, 2020).

The research subjects were selected using snowball sampling because the study required informants who had direct knowledge and experience regarding PSM activities in North Sumatra Province. The process began with a key informant, namely the Head of the Office of Community and Village Empowerment, Population, and Civil Registration of North Sumatra Province, who was considered to have institutional authority and policy knowledge related to PSM development. Based on recommendations from the key informant, the study involved five main informants consisting of one Intermediate Expert PSM, two Junior Expert PSM, and two First Expert PSM. Data collection continued until data saturation was reached, namely when the information obtained became repetitive and no longer produced substantially new findings (Neuman, 2014).

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, observation, and documentation. In-depth interviews were used to explore the experiences, meanings, interpretations, and communication strategies of PSM in carrying out village empowerment activities (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Focus group discussions were conducted to capture shared experiences, collective views, and differences in perception among PSM from different functional levels (Creswell, 2016). Observation was used to examine directly how PSM communicates, facilitates, motivates, and interacts with communities in empowerment-related activities. Documentation was used to strengthen the data through official regulations, activity reports, meeting notes, photographs, and other relevant archives. The combination of these techniques was intended to obtain comprehensive and credible data through methodological triangulation (Bowen, 2009; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

The data were analyzed using the interactive qualitative analysis model developed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which consists of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification. Data condensation was conducted by selecting, coding,

simplifying, and organizing relevant data from interviews, focus group discussions, observations, and documents. The condensed data were then displayed in structured narratives and thematic categories to identify patterns, relationships, and meanings. Finally, conclusions were drawn and verified by comparing data across sources and methods to ensure consistency and credibility. The validity of the data was strengthened through source triangulation and method triangulation. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information from the key informant and PSM informants, while method triangulation was carried out by comparing findings from interviews, focus group discussions, observation, and documentation. These procedures were used to ensure that the findings accurately reflected the empirical conditions of PSM communication practices in village community empowerment (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Creswell, 2018; Neuman, 2014).

Results

The analysis identified six interrelated themes that characterize the communication role of Community Self-Help Facilitators (PSM) as agents of change in village community empowerment: understanding information and empowerment policies, adaptation and self-learning, participatory and dialogic communication, building community trust, acting as facilitators and social mediators, and utilizing local culture and communication technology.

Understanding Information and Empowerment Policies

The research results indicate that the ability to understand information and community empowerment policies is a crucial aspect of PSM communication as an agent of change. All informants stated that, before carrying out community empowerment functions, PSM must understand relevant regulations, programs, policies, and the needs of the communities targeted for empowerment. This understanding becomes the basis for conveying information, providing assistance, and bridging government policies with the needs of village communities. In practice, PSM explains program objectives, activity benefits, and opportunities that communities can utilize through empowerment programs.

Adaptation and Self-Learning

The results show that adaptation and self-learning are essential components of PSM communication. Informants revealed that the dynamics of village development, changes in regulations, evolving community needs, and the complexity of social problems require PSM to continuously learn and adjust to different situations. Adaptation includes not only understanding new policies but also recognizing community characteristics, local culture, education levels, socioeconomic conditions, and communication patterns that differ across

regions. PSM therefore uses self-learning as a strategy to strengthen its capacity in carrying out community empowerment functions.

Participatory and Dialogic Communication

Participatory and dialogic communication emerged as the dominant communication practice used by PSM in empowering village communities. Informants explained that empowerment cannot be achieved through one-way communication focused only on transmitting government information. PSM creates two-way communication through village deliberations, group discussions, community mentoring, outreach activities, and other participatory forums. These forums provide opportunities for community members to express their opinions, needs, experiences, and aspirations, as well as to participate in identifying problems, determining priorities, making decisions, and evaluating activities.

Building Community Trust

The findings indicate that building community trust is a crucial aspect of PSM communication. Informants explained that the success of empowerment programs is determined not only by program quality but also by the level of community trust in the actors who deliver and support the programs. PSM builds trust through a humanistic approach, openness of information, consistency of action, direct presence in the community, and sensitivity to local needs and problems. Communities tend to be more willing to receive information, participate in activities, and engage in empowerment programs when they trust PSM, whereas low trust may result in passivity, skepticism, or rejection.

PSM as Facilitator and Social Mediator

The research results indicate that PSM does not function only as a disseminator of development information but also as a facilitator and social mediator. Informants explained that PSM frequently encounters different interests, needs, and problems within village communities. As a facilitator, PSM helps communities access information, programs, resources, and opportunities, while encouraging active involvement through mentoring, coaching, training, and capacity-building activities. As a social mediator, PSM bridges communication between communities, village governments, local governments, and other stakeholders to address problems and strengthen development collaboration.

Utilizing Local Culture and Communication Technology

The findings also show that PSM combines local cultural approaches with communication technology. PSM adapts communication methods to community values, norms, customs, social structures, and local languages, while involving influential community figures

where appropriate. Informants also reported the use of WhatsApp, social media, online meetings, and other digital communication platforms to distribute program information, coordinate with local and village governments, and maintain communication with communities. These technologies are particularly useful in North Sumatra because of its wide geographical coverage and the presence of areas that are difficult to reach.

Discussion

Policy Understanding as Development Communication Capital

The findings demonstrate that policy understanding is the primary foundation of PSM communication as an agent of change. Development communication is not limited to disseminating information but involves building shared understanding between government institutions and communities (Servaes, 2020). From this perspective, PSM performs an interpretive function by translating regulations and empowerment programs into language and contexts that are understandable and relevant to village communities. Policy understanding therefore operates not merely as an administrative requirement but as communication capital that enables PSM to connect government objectives with local needs and increase community acceptance of empowerment programs.

Adaptation and Self-Learning as Change-Agent Competence

The capacity for adaptation and self-learning confirms that PSM's role as an agent of change depends on continuous competence development. Rogers (2003) explains that a change agent influences decisions concerning innovation through planned communication and must understand the needs and characteristics of the social system in which the agent works. The findings extend this perspective by showing that learning is required not only from communities expected to adopt change but also from the change agents themselves. By adjusting communication strategies to cultural, educational, socioeconomic, and situational differences, PSM can reduce communication gaps and make empowerment interventions more responsive to local conditions.

Participatory Communication as an Empowerment Strategy

The dominance of participatory and dialogic practices is consistent with Participatory Development Communication, which positions communities as active subjects rather than passive recipients of development (Servaes, 2020). Dialogue, knowledge exchange, and collaborative learning enable communities to influence development decisions and develop a sense of ownership over programs. In this study, deliberations, group discussions, mentoring, and participatory forums function not only as channels for delivering information but also as

mechanisms through which communities identify problems, negotiate priorities, and evaluate activities. Consequently, communication becomes part of the empowerment process itself because it expands community agency in village development.

Trust as the Social Foundation of Empowerment Communication

The findings show that trust is both an outcome of effective communication and a prerequisite for community participation. Openness, consistency, direct presence, and sensitivity to local problems create relational credibility that encourages communities to communicate more openly and become involved in empowerment activities. Trust therefore strengthens the dialogic relationship between PSM and village communities and reduces skepticism toward externally introduced programs. Within participatory development communication, this relational dimension is important because meaningful participation is difficult to establish when communities do not trust the communicator or the institutions represented by that communicator.

Facilitation and Mediation in the Change Process

The role of PSM as facilitator and social mediator can be explained through Rogers' (2003) conception of the agent of change. A change agent does not simply transmit an innovation but also reduces uncertainty, builds relationships, assists decision-making, and links members of a social system with relevant resources. The facilitation role found in this study strengthens community capacity and access, while the mediation role connects community aspirations with village governments, local governments, and other stakeholders. These functions transform PSM communication from message delivery into collaborative problem-solving and help create a more participatory relationship between policy actors and village communities.

Local Culture and Technology in Innovation Diffusion

The combination of local cultural approaches and communication technology illustrates a contextual strategy for innovation diffusion. Local language, customary values, social structures, and community figures provide culturally legitimate channels that can reduce resistance and increase acceptance of development messages. At the same time, digital platforms expand the reach and speed of communication across geographically dispersed areas. In the perspective of diffusion of innovations, the effectiveness of an innovation depends not only on its content but also on the communication channels and social system through which it is introduced (Rogers, 2003). The findings therefore indicate that PSM communication becomes more effective when technological reach is integrated with cultural sensitivity rather than used as a substitute for direct and locally grounded interaction..

Conclusion

This study concludes that the communication role of Community Self-Help Facilitators, known in Indonesia as Penggerak Swadaya Masyarakat (PSM), is central to village community empowerment in North Sumatra Province. PSM does not merely function as an administrative implementer of government programs, but also as a development communicator and agent of change who translates policies, builds shared understanding, facilitates participation, and strengthens community capacity. The findings show that policy understanding is the main foundation of PSM communication because it enables PSM to explain empowerment programs in ways that are understandable, relevant, and acceptable to village communities. This ability allows PSM to bridge government policy with local community needs and to ensure that empowerment programs are not perceived as external interventions, but as opportunities for collective improvement. The study also shows that the effectiveness of PSM as an agent of change depends on continuous adaptation and self-learning. PSM must respond to changing regulations, diverse community characteristics, local cultural values, and the complexity of village development problems. Through participatory and dialogic communication, PSM creates spaces for communities to express aspirations, identify problems, formulate priorities, and participate in decision-making. Trust also becomes a crucial element in empowerment communication. Communities are more likely to accept information, participate in programs, and support development initiatives when PSM demonstrates openness, consistency, direct presence, and sensitivity to local problems.

Furthermore, PSM plays an important role as a facilitator and social mediator by connecting communities with village governments, local governments, and other stakeholders. This role enables collaborative problem-solving and strengthens the relationship between community aspirations and development policies. The use of local cultural approaches and communication technology further supports the effectiveness of PSM communication. Local culture strengthens community acceptance, while digital media expands access to information and accelerates coordination across geographically diverse areas. Therefore, the success of village community empowerment is determined not only by the availability of programs and resources, but also by the ability of PSM to communicate persuasively, participatively, contextually, and sustainably. Overall, strengthening the communication capacity of PSM is essential for improving community participation, supporting innovation diffusion, and building more independent and empowered village communities in North Sumatra Province

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