



Participatory Communication and Community Empowerment in Forum Bilikom: Non-Legal Constraints in Corporate–Community Deliberation

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Abstract

Participatory communication plays a crucial role in community empowerment by fostering dialogue, mutual understanding, and collaborative decision-making. However, the existence of participatory forums does not necessarily guarantee meaningful community engagement, particularly in contexts characterized by unequal communication practices. This study aims to examine how non-legal constraints shape participatory communication and community empowerment in *Forum Bilikom*, an informal corporate–community deliberative forum established through a corporate social responsibility (CSR) program in Indonesia. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, document analysis, and field observations, and analyzed thematically. The findings reveal a substantial gap between formal participation and substantive communicative engagement. Although the forum was designed to facilitate dialogue, communication remained dominated by one-way information dissemination, elite mediation, and culturally embedded norms of deference, which limited reciprocity, discouraged critical expression, and constrained community participation. The novelty of this study lies in introducing non-legal constraints as an analytical perspective for explaining how communicative inequalities are reproduced through socio-cultural and relational mechanisms rather than formal institutional restrictions. These findings highlight the importance of fostering more dialogic, reciprocal, and inclusive communication processes to strengthen community empowerment and participatory governance.

Keywords: Communication inequality; Community empowerment; Deliberative communication; Non-legal constraints; Participatory communication

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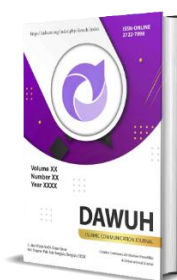
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INTRODUCTION

Participatory communication has long been recognized as a fundamental element of community empowerment because it enables dialogue, collective problem-solving, mutual learning, and inclusive decision-making among stakeholders. In development and community-based initiatives, communication is not merely a mechanism for transmitting information but also a process through which communities negotiate meanings, articulate concerns, and influence decisions affecting their lives. Effective participatory communication therefore contributes to strengthening social inclusion, accountability, and sustainable community development.

In the digital age, communication processes increasingly unfold across hybrid and decentralized environments in which information is produced, circulated, and negotiated beyond the boundaries of formal media systems. Although digital technologies have expanded opportunities for communication, they have simultaneously intensified structural inequalities, information asymmetries, and new forms of communicative exclusion that continue to affect participation in both online and offline settings (Bennett & Livingston, 2020; Napoli, 2020). While these issues have been widely examined in digital media governance, considerably less attention has been given to how similar communicative inequalities operate within informal deliberative forums that support community empowerment initiatives. This gap is particularly relevant in Indonesia, where corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs increasingly rely on community-based communication forums to facilitate stakeholder participation despite persistent socio-cultural hierarchies and unequal power relations. Therefore, examining Forum Bilikom provides an important empirical context for understanding how non-legal constraints shape participatory communication and community empowerment beyond formal institutional arrangements.

Within the European Union, concerns regarding communication inequalities and access to information have prompted the development of an extensive legal architecture for media and digital governance. Regulatory instruments such as the Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD), the Digital Services Act (DSA), and the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA) have been promoted as responses to threats against media pluralism, journalistic independence, and citizens' access to reliable information. These initiatives reflect a strong commitment to creating institutional conditions that support transparency, participation, and communicative inclusion. However, the Indonesian context presents a different challenge. Rather than being shaped primarily by formal regulatory frameworks, participatory communication in community development and CSR initiatives is often influenced by informal socio-cultural norms, local power relations, and organizational communication practices. This distinction highlights the need to examine how communicative inequalities emerge beyond legal and institutional arrangements, making Forum Bilikom an appropriate case for understanding the operation of non-legal constraints within corporate–community deliberation in Indonesia.

However, the growing emphasis on regulatory solutions also reveals an important limitation. Much of the contemporary debate remains grounded in media-centric and legalistic perspectives that implicitly assume communicative inclusion can be secured primarily through formal institutional arrangements. Such approaches often overlook how participation is enacted, negotiated, and constrained within informal communication arenas operating beyond formal regulatory oversight (Freedman, 2021; Couldry and Mejias, 2020; Trappel and Tomaz, 2021). As a result, communicative inequalities may persist even when formal mechanisms of transparency and participation are present.



Beyond formal media systems, participatory communication frequently occurs within community forums, stakeholder meetings, and local deliberative spaces where development programs are discussed and negotiated. These arenas play a crucial role in community empowerment because they provide opportunities for dialogue, knowledge exchange, and collective action. Particularly in contexts involving environmental management, corporate social responsibility (CSR), and community development, such forums function as important spaces where diverse actors interact and where communication shapes participation outcomes. Nevertheless, unlike formal media institutions, these informal arenas often lack safeguards that ensure equal participation, deliberative quality, and communicative reciprocity (Dryzek and Niemeyer, 2020; Curato et al., 2021).

This article argues that barriers to participatory communication and community empowerment often emerge not through formal restrictions but through non-legal constraints embedded in everyday communicative practices. These constraints include elite mediation, one-way communication, and culturally embedded norms of deference that influence who is able to participate, whose voices are recognized, and how information circulates within deliberative settings. As emphasized in deliberative democracy and communication scholarship, exclusion and marginalization are frequently reproduced through relational and socio-cultural mechanisms rather than through explicit suppression (Mansbridge et al., 2020; Sanders, 1997; Waisbord, 2022). While previous studies have extensively examined participatory communication, CSR-based stakeholder engagement, and deliberative communication as mechanisms for fostering inclusion and collaboration, relatively little attention has been paid to how non-legal constraints embedded in everyday communicative practices undermine these participatory processes. Addressing this gap, the present study introduces *non-legal constraints* as an analytical lens to explain how communicative inequalities are reproduced within an informal corporate–community deliberative forum, thereby extending participatory communication scholarship beyond institutional and procedural explanations.

To examine these dynamics, this study investigates the Forum Bina Lingkungan Komunikasi (Forum Bilikom), an informal community–corporate communication forum established within a corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiative in Indonesia. The forum was formally designed to facilitate dialogue, information sharing, and participatory decision-making between corporate actors, local communities, and village authorities. As such, it represents an important arena for understanding how participatory communication operates in practice and how community empowerment may be facilitated or constrained through communicative interactions.

Drawing on a qualitative case study approach, this research analyzes patterns of information flow, participation, and silence within this ostensibly open deliberative space. Rather than treating the case as an isolated phenomenon, the study uses Forum Bilikom as an analytical lens for understanding broader challenges facing participatory communication and community empowerment initiatives, particularly in contexts characterized by power asymmetries and socio-cultural hierarchies. Accordingly, the objective of this study is to examine how non-legal constraints shape participatory communication and community empowerment within an informal corporate–community deliberative forum. The central research question guiding this study is: How do non-legal constraints shape participatory communication and community empowerment within an informal deliberative forum? To address this question, the study contributes by (1) identifying the communicative mechanisms through which non-legal constraints operate, (2) advancing the concept of non-legal constraints as an analytical lens for participatory communication research, and (3) providing empirical evidence from

an Indonesian CSR forum to enrich the literature on community empowerment and deliberative communication.

This article makes three main contributions. *First*, it demonstrates that communication barriers within community empowerment initiatives are not solely institutional or procedural but are also relational and socio-cultural in nature. *Second*, it advances the concept of non-legal constraints as an analytical lens for understanding how communicative inequalities are reproduced within ostensibly participatory settings. *Third*, by drawing on empirical evidence from a Global South context, the study contributes to the development of participatory communication scholarship by highlighting how everyday communicative practices shape the effectiveness of community empowerment processes.

METHODS

Research Design and Case Selection

This study employs a qualitative case study design to examine how participatory communication and community empowerment are shaped within informal deliberative arenas. A case study approach is particularly appropriate for investigating complex communicative processes embedded in specific institutional, cultural, and relational contexts that cannot be adequately captured through variable-based approaches. Rather than seeking statistical generalization, the study aims to generate analytical insights into how non-legal constraints influence communicative participation, dialogue, and community engagement in practice.

The empirical focus is the Forum Bilikom, an informal community–corporate communication forum established within a CSR initiative in Indonesia. The forum was formally designed as a participatory space for dialogue, information exchange, and collaborative problem-solving among a cement company, local communities, and village-level authorities. Its emphasis on openness, participation, and stakeholder engagement makes it a theoretically relevant site for examining the relationship between participatory communication and community empowerment within an informal deliberative setting (Dryzek, 2010; Mansbridge et al., 2012).

The case was selected through purposive sampling based on three criteria. *First*, it represents an institutionalized yet informally governed communication arena that facilitates interaction among multiple stakeholders. *Second*, it addresses issues of public concern, particularly environmental management and community development, where communication and participation play critical roles in shaping collective outcomes. *Third*, it operates within a socio-cultural context characterized by power asymmetries and norms of social deference, allowing the examination of how relational and cultural factors influence communicative participation and community engagement (Curato et al., 2021). The case is not treated as representative of all participatory forums but as an analytically strategic site for understanding how communication processes shape empowerment outcomes in community development initiatives (Freedman, 2021).

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected between January and December 2024. The study involved 17 purposively selected participants, including community members, village officials, CSR personnel, and Forum Bilikom representatives. Data were obtained through in-depth semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis of CSR reports, meeting minutes, and other relevant documents.

Data analysis followed an iterative thematic approach. Interview transcripts, organizational documents, and field notes were first subjected to initial open coding to identify meaningful units



related to participation, dialogue, information exchange, silence, and mediation. Similar codes were then grouped into broader analytical categories, which were subsequently refined into overarching themes through continuous comparison across multiple data sources. Particular attention was given to communicative situations in which opportunities for participation formally existed but meaningful engagement remained limited, as well as to instances of hesitation, non-participation, and communicative deference. The emerging themes were continuously reviewed against the interview transcripts, field notes, and documentary evidence to ensure consistency and strengthen the credibility of the interpretation through data triangulation.

Rather than treating silence as an absence of communication, the analysis conceptualizes silence and limited participation as indicators of non-legal constraints affecting participatory communication processes. This analytical approach is informed by critical deliberative scholarship, which understands exclusion and inequality as outcomes embedded within everyday communicative practices rather than solely as consequences of explicit restrictions on expression (Mansbridge et al., 2020; Sanders, 1997; Waisbord, 2022).

Analytical Approach and Ethics

The study adopts a critical interpretive orientation that recognizes the researcher's role in constructing meaning from situated communicative experiences. Rather than evaluating the forum against idealized standards of participation, the analysis focuses on how communication, participation, and empowerment are enacted, negotiated, and constrained in practice. Particular attention is given to the relational, cultural, and institutional conditions that shape communicative outcomes and influence community engagement.

Ethical considerations included informed consent, participant anonymity, and the protection of sensitive information related to corporate–community relations. All interviews were conducted voluntarily, and identifying information was removed to minimize potential risks, particularly for participants expressing critical perspectives. These procedures are consistent with established ethical principles in qualitative research conducted within contexts characterized by power asymmetries and complex stakeholder relationships.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Formal Participation and Limited Communicative Engagement

Forum Bilikom was institutionally designed as a participatory communication forum intended to facilitate dialogue among corporate representatives, local communities, and village authorities. Regular meetings, formal invitations, and structured CSR presentations reflected an organizational commitment to openness and stakeholder participation. At a procedural level, the forum appeared to provide opportunities for community involvement in discussions concerning environmental management and waste-processing initiatives. However, empirical findings reveal a significant gap between formal participation and substantive communicative engagement. Although community members were invited to attend meetings and receive information, their involvement was largely confined to listening rather than actively shaping deliberative processes. As one participant explained: *“The company explained the program, and we listened. Opportunities to ask questions were available, but discussions rarely changed the decisions that had already been made.”* (Forum Participant, Interview).



As summarized in Table 1, participation was formally available, yet communicative reciprocity remained limited.

Table 1. Communicative Constraints on Empowerment

Analytical Dimension	Empirical Manifestation	Communicative Implication	Implication for Community Empowerment
Formal Participation	Regular meetings and CSR presentations	Procedural inclusion without meaningful dialogue	Limited community influence in decision-making
Information Flow	One-way dissemination of technical and managerial information	Restricted communicative reciprocity	Reduced opportunities for collaborative learning
Elite Mediation	Village elites act as primary intermediaries	Unequal participation and filtered communication	Uneven distribution of communicative power
Cultural Norms	Deference to authority and avoidance of confrontation	Silence normalized as appropriate behavior	Limited community agency and voice
Participation Outcomes	Limited feedback and unexpressed concerns	Low deliberative quality	Community empowerment remains constrained

Source: Authors' analysis based on empirical findings

Table 1 demonstrates that the existence of participatory structures alone did not guarantee meaningful communication. Information dissemination followed a predominantly one-way pattern in which corporate actors delivered technical and managerial narratives while community members occupied the role of recipients. Consequently, participation remained procedural rather than dialogic.

Important decisions regarding waste management and environmental programs were frequently presented as predetermined outcomes rather than subjects of collective deliberation. Opportunities for questioning, reinterpretation, and collaborative problem-solving were therefore limited. These findings indicate that formal participation does not automatically generate meaningful communicative engagement or empowerment.

Elite Mediation as a Barrier to Participatory Communication

A second key finding concerns the role of elite mediation in structuring communicative participation within Forum Bilikom. Communication between corporate representatives and the wider community was commonly filtered through village officials and selected community representatives occupying socially and institutionally privileged positions.

Interview data indicate that ordinary community members rarely communicated directly with corporate actors during deliberative sessions. Questions, concerns, and suggestions were typically conveyed through designated intermediaries perceived as more legitimate or authoritative speakers. *“Not everyone spoke during the meetings. Usually the village officials represented us because they were more familiar with the issues being discussed.”* (Resident, interview).

While such arrangements facilitated organizational coordination, they simultaneously narrowed the diversity of perspectives entering the communication process. Importantly, communicative inequality did not emerge through explicit exclusion. Rather, it was reproduced through routinized interaction patterns that privileged certain actors as legitimate communicators.



Participation therefore became unevenly distributed, reinforcing asymmetries of communicative authority within the forum.

These findings suggest that participatory communication can be constrained even when formal opportunities for engagement are available. In this context, elite mediation functioned as a non-legal barrier that restricted reciprocity and reduced the capacity of community members to influence collective discussions.

Cultural Deference and Silence in Community Participation

Beyond institutional mediation, cultural norms of deference played a significant role in shaping communicative behavior within the forum. Participants frequently expressed reluctance to challenge authority, raise critical questions, or openly disagree during discussions. *“Sometimes I had questions, but I felt uncomfortable expressing them because the company representatives and village leaders were present.”* (Community member, interview). Such tendencies were closely associated with locally embedded values emphasizing social harmony, respect for authority, and the avoidance of confrontation.

Rather than facilitating open dialogue, these norms often discouraged critical engagement and reinforced existing communication hierarchies. Several participants acknowledged possessing concerns regarding waste sorting practices and RDF quality but chose not to express them publicly during meetings.

In this context, silence should not be interpreted as a lack of awareness or concern. Instead, it represents a socially conditioned response shaped by perceptions of authority and culturally appropriate communicative conduct. Silence therefore emerged as an important indicator of constrained participation rather than disengagement.

The interaction between cultural deference, elite mediation, and one-way communication patterns is summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Mechanisms of Communicative Constraint in Forum Bilikom

Mechanism	Empirical Process	Communicative Effect	Implication for Participatory Communication and Community Empowerment
Formal Participation	Institutionalized meetings and structured CSR forums	Procedural inclusion without substantive deliberation	Participation exists formally but remains limited in practice
One-way Information Flow	Technical information delivered without dialogic exchange	Limited reciprocity and restricted feedback	Weak collaborative learning and problem-solving
Elite Mediation	Communication filtered through village elites and designated representatives	Unequal communicative authority	Community voices unevenly represented
Cultural Deference	Norms emphasizing respect, hierarchy, and social harmony	Reluctance to question authority	Reduced community agency and voice
Silence	Withholding concerns, questions, and criticism	Absence of contestation in deliberative interactions	Empowerment opportunities constrained



Deliberative Outcome	Limited participation and narrow range of perspectives	Low deliberative quality	Community empowerment weakened
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Source: Authors' analysis based on empirical findings

Together, these findings demonstrate that communication barriers may emerge without formal restrictions. Even within ostensibly participatory forums, socio-cultural factors shape communicative behavior in ways that limit meaningful engagement and reduce opportunities for empowerment.

Non-legal Constraints and Their Implications for Community Empowerment

The interview data consistently suggest that participation within Forum Bilikom was experienced more as attendance and information reception than as active deliberation and collective decision-making. Taken together, the findings reveal that participatory communication within the forum was shaped by a set of interconnected non-legal constraints, including one-way information flow, elite mediation, cultural deference, and silence. Rather than operating independently, these mechanisms reinforced one another and produced persistent patterns of limited communicative participation.

To illustrate how these interconnected constraints influenced participatory communication and empowerment outcomes, Figure 1 presents the conceptual relationships identified through the analysis.



Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Non-Legal Constraints Shaping Participatory Communication and Community Empowerment in Forum Bilikom.

Source: Conceptual framework developed by the authors based on the empirical findings of this study. ChatGPT was used solely to assist in the graphical visualization of the figure, while the conceptual design, analytical framework, and interpretation were developed entirely by the authors

These dynamics affected not only communication processes but also community empowerment outcomes. Although community members were formally included in meetings and consultations, their opportunities to influence discussions, question decisions, and contribute alternative perspectives remained limited. Consequently, participation frequently functioned as procedural inclusion rather than collaborative decision-making, reducing the capacity of community members to exercise meaningful agency within the deliberative process.

The findings further indicate that challenges associated with environmental management and waste-processing initiatives cannot be understood solely as technical or informational issues. Difficulties in program implementation, public understanding, and community involvement reflected deeper communicative limitations embedded within stakeholder interactions. In this regard, communication functioned not merely as a channel for information dissemination but also as a determining factor influencing the extent to which community members could engage with, interpret, and contribute to development initiatives.

Overall, the results suggest that the effectiveness of participatory forums depends not only on institutional inclusion but also on the quality of communicative engagement occurring within them. When communicative reciprocity, inclusiveness, and community voice are constrained by socio-cultural and relational factors, formal opportunities for participation may have limited impact on empowerment outcomes. The findings therefore highlight the importance of fostering more dialogic and inclusive communication practices to ensure that participation contributes to genuine community empowerment rather than merely fulfilling procedural expectations.

Participatory Communication Beyond Procedural Inclusion

The findings highlight the importance of moving beyond procedural understandings of participation toward a more substantive conception of participatory communication. Although Forum Bilikom was formally established as a space for dialogue and stakeholder engagement, the empirical evidence demonstrates that meaningful participation requires more than the institutional provision of communicative opportunities. Consistent with broader concerns regarding communication inequalities in contemporary societies, participation may remain constrained even when formal communication channels are available (Bennett and Livingston, 2020; Napoli, 2020).

A central finding of this study is the disjunction between formal participation and substantive communicative engagement. Community members were included procedurally through invitations, attendance, and representation, yet their capacity to influence discussions remained limited. This finding supports critiques of participatory initiatives that equate attendance with empowerment while overlooking inequalities embedded within communicative processes (Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Cornwall, 2008).

From a participatory communication perspective, dialogue should not be understood merely as the transmission of information but as a reciprocal process through which stakeholders jointly construct meaning, negotiate interests, and influence collective decisions. The findings demonstrate that when communication is dominated by one-way information dissemination and mediated through hierarchical relationships, opportunities for genuine participation become restricted. As a result, participatory forums may function more as symbolic mechanisms of inclusion than as spaces for collaborative problem-solving and democratic engagement.

These findings suggest that the success of participatory initiatives should be evaluated not only by the existence of communication forums but also by the extent to which those forums enable

reciprocity, critical reflection, and meaningful influence over decision-making processes. In this sense, participation represents a communicative achievement rather than a procedural outcome

Communicative Inequality and Community Empowerment

This study demonstrates that communicative inequalities are frequently reproduced through everyday interactional practices rather than through formal restrictions. One-way information dissemination, elite mediation, and culturally embedded norms of deference collectively limited reciprocity and reduced opportunities for collaborative deliberation. These findings support critical perspectives arguing that communication power extends beyond formal institutions and operates through relational mechanisms embedded in social life (Freedman, 2021; Couldry and Mejias, 2020; Trappel and Tomaz, 2021).

A major contribution of this study lies in the identification of non-legal constraints as mechanisms through which communicative inequality is reproduced within community-based participatory settings. Unlike conventional explanations that emphasize institutional exclusion, the findings demonstrate how inequalities emerge through normalized communication practices that shape who speaks, who is heard, and whose knowledge is recognized as legitimate. This interpretation aligns with broader sociological perspectives emphasizing that power often operates through diffuse and relational processes rather than overt coercion (Foucault, 1980; Bourdieu, 1991).

The findings further indicate that communicative inequality has direct implications for community empowerment. From a deliberative perspective, empowerment cannot be reduced to physical presence, representation, or attendance within participatory forums. Rather, empowerment depends on the capacity of individuals and communities to articulate concerns, challenge dominant perspectives, and contribute meaningfully to collective decision-making (Habermas, 1996; Fraser, 1990; Young, 2000; Dryzek, 2010). When communicative authority becomes concentrated among particular actors, opportunities for broader community participation become constrained.

The study also demonstrates the importance of socio-cultural context in shaping empowerment outcomes. Norms emphasizing respect for authority and social harmony influenced how participants interpreted their communicative roles and responsibilities. Rather than viewing these dynamics as anomalies, they should be understood as important factors affecting participatory processes across diverse community development settings (Banerjee, 2021; Chakrabarty, 2000).

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that community development and CSR initiatives should move beyond creating formal participation mechanisms and focus on fostering more dialogic and inclusive communication processes. Reducing excessive elite mediation, encouraging reciprocal communication, and creating spaces where community members can express concerns without social hesitation are essential for strengthening participatory governance and sustainable community empowerment (Jenkins, 2020). Such efforts align with participatory governance approaches that emphasize co-creation, communicative justice, and collaborative problem-solving as foundations for effective community development (Fung, 2006; Gaventa, 2006).

CONCLUSION

This study examined how participatory communication operates within an informal deliberative forum established through a corporate social responsibility initiative in Indonesia. The findings reveal a significant gap between formal participation and substantive communicative engagement. Although Forum Bilikom provided institutional opportunities for dialogue, participation



was constrained by one-way information flow, elite mediation, cultural norms of deference, and the normalization of silence.

The study demonstrates that barriers to community empowerment do not arise solely from formal institutional limitations. Rather, they are frequently embedded within everyday communicative practices that shape who can participate, whose voices are recognized, and how collective decisions are negotiated. These non-legal constraints contribute to the reproduction of communicative inequalities even within forums explicitly designed to promote participation.

Theoretically, this research contributes to participatory communication scholarship by advancing the concept of non-legal constraints as an analytical lens for understanding communicative inequality in community development settings. It further highlights the importance of examining relational and socio-cultural dimensions of communication alongside institutional arrangements when evaluating participatory processes.

Practically, the findings suggest that community empowerment initiatives should move beyond procedural participation and prioritize the creation of more inclusive, dialogic, and reciprocal communication processes. Strengthening community voice, reducing excessive elite mediation, and addressing socio-cultural barriers to participation are essential for enhancing the effectiveness of participatory governance and community development programs.

Finally, this study is limited to a single qualitative case and therefore does not seek statistical generalization. Future research may explore similar communicative dynamics across different cultural, organizational, and development contexts to further understand how participatory communication contributes to community empowerment in diverse settings.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this article.

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