



POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN DEVELOPMENT: NARRATIVE CONTESTATION AND THE LEGITIMACY OF PUBLIC POLICY IN THE TUBAN OIL REFINERY PROJECT

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Abstract :

This study aims to analyze political communication of development in the contestation of narratives and public policy legitimacy within the Tuban Oil Refinery Project. The project, developed by PT Pertamina (Persero), is positioned as part of Indonesia's strategic national agenda to strengthen energy security and economic growth. This research employs a qualitative approach with a case study design, utilizing in-depth interviews, observation, and document and media analysis. The findings reveal that the government constructs development framing based on rational-legal legitimacy and performance legitimacy through predominantly top-down and informative communication patterns. However, at the local level, particularly in Tuban, narrative contestation emerges between official state discourse and community counter-narratives concerning land acquisition and environmental impacts. Policy legitimacy is found to be dynamic and continuously negotiated within the public sphere, including social media platforms. The study concludes that the success of strategic national projects depends not only on administrative and regulatory effectiveness but also on dialogical and participatory political communication.

Keywords : political communication, policy legitimacy, development, narrative contestation, public administration

INTRODUCTION

National development in developing countries is not merely a technocratic process, but also an arena of political communication filled with interests and narrative contestation. In the context of public administration, strategic development policies often require legitimacy that is constructed through communication between the state, the market, and society. Large-scale infrastructure projects become complex spaces of interaction among political actors, bureaucracies, and affected citizens (Hasanah et al., 2025). These dynamics demonstrate that policy success is not solely determined by administrative planning, but also by the effectiveness of its political communication. Therefore, the analysis of political communication in development becomes relevant in understanding the process of public policy legitimation (Putri & Taun, 2023).

The Tuban Oil Refinery Project, developed by PT Pertamina (Persero) in collaboration with Rosneft, is one of Indonesia's National Strategic Projects with significant economic and geopolitical implications. The project is designed to



strengthen national energy security and reduce dependence on imported fuel (Siringoringo et al., 2023). However, its implementation has generated various public responses, ranging from support for its economic benefits to criticism regarding land acquisition and environmental impacts. This narrative contestation has evolved in the public sphere, including mass media and social media. Such a situation underscores the importance of political communication in building policy legitimacy (Rahayu, 2023).

From the perspective of public administration, the legitimacy of public policy does not rely solely on formal legal foundations, but also on social acceptance and public trust. Legitimacy theory emphasizes that governments must construct the meaning of development as a shared interest (Asbari et al., 2026). On the other hand, affected communities develop alternative narratives that reflect local interests and distributive justice. The interaction between official narratives and counter-narratives creates a deliberative arena that influences policy stability. Thus, political communication becomes a strategic instrument in maintaining the sustainability of development projects (Firda et al., 2025).

The Tuban Oil Refinery, located in Tuban, also illustrates how local contexts influence perceptions of national policies. Social dynamics, regional economic structures, and relations between local and central governments play roles in shaping public opinion (Hawari et al., 2026). The government, as the primary actor, is required to manage development messages in a transparent and participatory manner. When communication is one-way and less inclusive, the potential for social resistance increases. Therefore, a collaborative approach to policy communication becomes an urgent necessity (Suhartini & Hasubullah, 2025).

Based on the above explanation, this study is important to analyze how political communication in development both shapes and is shaped by narrative contestation within the Tuban Oil Refinery Project (Simamora et al., 2024). This research seeks to explain the mechanisms of producing public policy legitimacy through government communication strategies and community responses. The focus of the study lies in the interaction among state actors, corporations, and local communities in constructing development discourse. The contribution of this research is expected to enrich the public administration literature, particularly in the aspects of political communication and strategic development governance. Furthermore, the findings may serve as a reference in formulating a more responsive and democratic model of policy communication (Zalukhu et al., 2024).

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design to analyze political communication in development within the Tuban Oil Refinery Project. The qualitative approach was chosen because it is capable of exploring meanings, perceptions, and narrative constructions that develop in the public sphere. The case study design allows for an in-depth exploration of policy dynamics within the specific context of a national strategic project. The focus of

the analysis is directed at the processes of production, distribution, and reception of policy messages. Thus, this research emphasizes a contextual and interpretative understanding of political communication phenomena (Alaslan, 2023).

The research location is Tuban, as the area affected by the Tuban Oil Refinery Project. The research subjects include central and local government actors, representatives of the implementing company such as PT Pertamina (Persero), community leaders, and groups of affected residents. In addition, mass media and social media are used as data sources to trace public narratives. Informants were selected purposively based on their relevance and involvement in the project. A snowball sampling technique was employed to expand the network of informants possessing significant information (Safrudin et al., 2023).

Research data were obtained through in-depth interviews, field observations, and documentation studies. Interviews were conducted to explore actors' perspectives regarding communication strategies, policy legitimacy, and public responses. Observations were used to understand the dynamics of social interactions and ongoing communication forums. Documentation studies included analysis of policy documents, press releases, media coverage, and social media content related to the project. Source and method triangulation were applied to enhance the validity and credibility of the data.

Data analysis was conducted interactively through the stages of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. This study applies a discourse analysis approach to identify the construction of development narratives and policy legitimacy. The analysis focuses on power relations, symbols, and framing strategies employed by policy actors. Data were categorized based on key themes such as economic growth narratives, energy security, social justice, and environmental impacts. The analytical process was carried out cyclically until a comprehensive interpretation was achieved (Septiana et al., 2024).

Data validity was ensured through triangulation techniques, member checking, and audit trails. The researcher ensured that the resulting interpretations aligned with the experiences and perspectives of the informants. Research ethics were maintained by obtaining informed consent and safeguarding the confidentiality of respondents' identities. The study also considered the social and political sensitivities attached to a national strategic project. Through this methodological approach, the research is expected to provide a valid and responsible scientific contribution to the study of public administration (Asipi et al., 2022).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Development Narrative and Government Communication Strategy

The government and corporations constructed the development narrative of the Tuban Oil Refinery as a symbol of energy sovereignty and the acceleration of national economic growth. Through official statements, press releases, and media coverage, the project has been positioned as part of the agenda for energy security and reducing fuel imports. Consistently emphasized macroeconomic benefits such as job creation and increased investment. This narrative was

reinforced by the central government's support, which included the project in the National Strategic Projects scheme. This framing strategy aims to build rational-legal legitimacy as well as performance legitimacy (Nankeni & Muljaningsih, 2022).

From a political communication perspective, the dominant communication pattern is top-down and informative in nature. The government tends to deliver messages based on technical data and economic arguments rather than opening broad spaces for public deliberation. This has resulted in limited substantive public participation during the early stages of policy decision-making. On the other hand, the use of mainstream mass media demonstrates a tendency to reproduce the state's official narrative. This condition indicates that development communication remains oriented toward policy persuasion rather than collaborative dialogue (Gulo, D.J., Simamora, P.R.T., Sukatendel, 2022).

Theoretically, these findings confirm that political communication serves as a strategic instrument in building public policy legitimacy. However, legitimacy constructed through an informative approach has not fully generated deep social acceptance. Formal legitimacy may be fulfilled through regulations and administrative procedures, yet social legitimacy continues to face challenges at the local level. Thus, the effectiveness of government communication largely depends on its capacity to create inclusive participatory spaces.

In addition to economic and energy security framing, the government also employed nationalist symbolism to build support for the project. The narrative of energy sovereignty is positioned as part of Indonesia's broader agenda of structural economic transformation. This strategy strengthens normative legitimacy by linking the project to wider national interests. In the context of political communication, symbols and nationalist rhetoric function as instruments for mobilizing public support. However, the effectiveness of such symbolism depends greatly on the consistency between the messages conveyed and the realities of policy implementation on the ground.

On the other hand, the findings reveal a communication gap between the central and local governments in conveying development messages. Less integrated message coordination has the potential to create informational ambiguity at the local level. This has led to diverse interpretations among affected communities. From a public administration perspective, inconsistencies in communication across levels of government can weaken policy cohesion.

Therefore, the integration of cross-institutional communication strategies becomes a crucial factor in maintaining the stability of legitimacy in strategic development projects (Ardiana et al., 2024).

Table 1. Construction of Development Narratives and GovernmentC Strategies in the Tuban Oil Refinery Project

Analysis Aspect	Research Findings	Data Source	Public Administration Implications
Public Support	Some community members support the project due to employment opportunities and regional economic growth	Interviews with Tuban residents	Strengthens social legitimacy based on welfare expectations
Counter Narratives	Concerns regarding land acquisition and environmental impacts	Community forums and local NGOs	Demonstrates the importance of transparency and distributive justice
Social Media	Social media serves as a space for articulating criticism and aspirations	Digital content analysis	Expands the arena of policy discourse beyond formal forums
Level of Trust	Public trust fluctuates depending on the intensity of government communication	Interviews and observations	Legitimacy is dynamic and must be managed continuously
Interaction Pattern	The lack of deliberative dialogue triggers opinion polarization	Observation of public interactions	Encourages the need for a collaborative governance model

(Source: Research Findings, 2026)

Based on Table 1, it can be explained that the government and corporations, particularly PT Pertamina (Persero), have systematically constructed the framing of the Tuban Oil Refinery Project as a symbol of national energy security and the acceleration of economic growth. This narrative focuses on rational arguments such as increasing production capacity, reducing fuel imports, and creating employment opportunities. This strategy reflects an effort to build rational-legal legitimacy through regulatory frameworks and the project's status as part of the national strategic agenda. Thus, the state's formal legitimacy is reinforced through technocratic language and economic

performance indicators.

However, the dominant communication pattern remains top-down and informative. The government primarily emphasizes one-way information delivery through press conferences, mainstream media, and official documents. Public participation tends to be consultative rather than deliberative, resulting in limited space for substantive dialogue. This condition has implications for the emergence of perception gaps between state actors and affected communities. Administratively, this approach is effective in establishing formal legitimacy, but it has not fully generated participatory and sustainable social legitimacy.

These findings indicate that political communication in development is still oriented more toward policy persuasion than collaboration. From a public administration perspective, long-term policy effectiveness depends not only on technical success but also on the quality of communicative interaction between the government and citizens. Therefore, a transformation from an informative communication model toward a dialogical model is necessary to strengthen policy legitimacy comprehensively.

Public Narrative Contestation and the Dynamics of Social Legitimacy

Narrative contestation at the local level, particularly in Tuban as the area directly affected by the project, reveals diverse public responses. Some members of the community support the project due to expectations of regional economic growth and employment opportunities. However, other groups articulate concerns regarding land acquisition, environmental impacts, and unequal distribution of benefits. These counter-narratives have developed through community forums, civil society organizations, and social media. Such dynamics create a discursive space in which the very meaning of development is debated (Athallah, 2022).

The contestation of narratives demonstrates that policy legitimacy is not static, but continuously negotiated. When communities feel insufficiently involved in communication processes, perceptions of exclusion may emerge, potentially reducing public trust. Conversely, participatory dialogue can strengthen social legitimacy and minimize resistance. This indicates that political communication in development needs to integrate a collaborative governance approach.

Analytically, this phenomenon confirms that development is not merely a technical-administrative matter, but also an arena of competing meanings and interests. The state, corporations, and society act as producers of narratives that interact within the public sphere. The success of strategic projects such as the Tuban Oil Refinery largely depends on the ability of policy actors to manage such contestation democratically. Therefore, a dialogical, transparent, and responsive communication model becomes a primary prerequisite for achieving sustainable policy legitimacy (Lee et al., 2024).

Narrative contestation also reveals differences in interests among community groups at the local level. Groups with access to economic opportunities tend to construct supportive narratives toward the project. In contrast, groups that feel directly affected by land acquisition or socio-ecological

changes are more critical of the policy. These socio-economic positions influence how communities interpret development. Thus, social legitimacy is not homogeneous, but fragmented according to the experiences and interests of each group.

Furthermore, the dynamics of public discourse indicate that digital spaces accelerate the dissemination of information while broadening the spectrum of opinions. Social media functions not only as a channel for criticism, but also as a means of advocacy and consolidation for civil society movements. This condition requires the government to adopt communication strategies that are adaptive and responsive to real-time issue developments. Within the framework of modern governance, managing public opinion becomes an integral part of policy management. Therefore, the sustainability of policy legitimacy is largely determined by the state's capacity to manage communicative interactions in a transparent, inclusive, and continuous manner.

Table 2. Public Narrative Contestation and the Dynamics of Social Legitimacy in Tuban

Analysis Aspect	Research Findings	Data Source	Public Administration Implications
Public Support	Some members of the community support the project due to employment opportunities and regional economic growth	Interviews with Tuban residents	Strengthens social legitimacy based on welfare expectations
Counter Narratives	Concerns regarding land acquisition and environmental impacts	Community forums and local NGOs	Highlights the importance of transparency and distributive justice
Social Media	Social media serves as a space for articulating criticism and aspirations	Digital content analysis	Expands the arena of policy discourse beyond formal forums

Level of Trust	Public trust fluctuates depending on the intensity of government communication	Interviews and observations	Legitimacy is dynamic and must be managed continuously
Interaction Pattern	The lack of deliberative dialogue triggers opinion polarization	Observation of public interactions	Mendorong kebutuhan model collaborative governance

(Source: Research Findings, 2026)

Based on the findings presented in Table 2, the legitimacy of the Tuban Oil Refinery Project policy in Tuban is dynamic and influenced by narrative contestation at the local level. Some members of the community support the project due to expectations of regional economic growth and new employment opportunities. This support strengthens social legitimacy based on welfare expectations. However, on the other hand, counter-narratives have emerged highlighting issues of land acquisition, environmental impacts, and unequal distribution of development benefits.

Social media and community forums have become important arenas for the production and reproduction of alternative narratives. Digital spaces expand public participation beyond the formal mechanisms provided by the government. This indicates that policy legitimacy is no longer entirely controlled by state actors, but is negotiated within an open and plural public sphere. When government communication is less responsive to criticism, the level of public trust tends to fluctuate.

Conceptually, these findings affirm that development constitutes a discursive arena involving power relations and competing interests. Legitimacy is not static, but continuously constructed through inclusive communication processes. Therefore, a collaborative governance approach becomes relevant in integrating official narratives and local aspirations in a more democratic manner. Without substantive dialogue, the potential for social resistance may hinder the sustainability of strategic development policies.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that political communication in development within the Tuban Oil Refinery Project serves as a strategic instrument in building public policy legitimacy. The government, together with PT Pertamina (Persero), framed the project as a symbol of energy security and national economic growth. This narrative has been effective in establishing formal legitimacy based on regulatory frameworks and policy performance. However, the dominant communication pattern remains top-down and informative, resulting in public participation being largely limited to the stage of policy dissemination. This

condition indicates that rational-legal legitimacy has been fulfilled, yet social legitimacy has not been fully consolidated.

At the local level, particularly in Tuban, narrative contestation has occurred between the government's official discourse and community counter-narratives. Some residents support the project due to expectations of economic benefits, while other groups highlight issues of land acquisition and environmental impacts. This contestation affirms that policy legitimacy is dynamic and continuously negotiated within the public sphere, including social media and community forums. Thus, development is not merely an administrative-technocratic process, but also a discursive arena involving power relations and competing interests.

Theoretically, this research reinforces the argument that political communication, legitimacy, and governance are interrelated elements in public administration. The success of national strategic projects depends not only on technical and regulatory effectiveness, but also on the quality of inclusive and participatory communication. Therefore, public policy legitimacy requires a dialogical approach capable of sustainably integrating state narratives with community aspirations.

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