CRUCIAL CRISIS COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES IN ADDRESSING LAND CONFLICT: A CASE STUDY IN DEVELOPING TOBA CALDERA RESORT IN INDONESIA

aTetti Nauli Panjaitan, bHumaizi, cIskandar Zulkarnain, dSyukur Kholil

ABSTRACT

Objective: This study scrutinizes the communication processes between the Lake Toba Authority Agency (BPOTDT) and the Sigapiton indigenous community concerning land conflict amid Toba Caldera Resort's (TCR) development.

Method: Employing qualitative methodology involving observations, interviews, and data triangulation, the research evaluates the communication strategies and their impact on stakeholders.

Result: Findings reveal significant communication gaps between BPOTDT and the Sigapiton community. BPOTDT's communication lacks informativeness, relevance to the community's interests, consistency in conveying benefits, and transparency about TCR development's positive and negative impacts. This deficiency in communication leads to conflicts arising from differing message interpretations, especially regarding land acquisition.

Conclusion: This study concludes that BPOTDT's need to enhance corporate social responsibility communication, ensuring informativeness, relevance, consistency, and transparency. It highlights the importance of objective, fact-based messaging and the need for alignment with community interests for sustainable conflict resolution and improved stakeholder engagement.

Keywords: lake toba authority agency (bpotdt), crisis communication strategies, land conflict, corporate social responsibility.

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a PhD in Communication Studies, Department of Communication Studies, Universitas Sumatera Utara, Medan, Indonesia, E-mail: tettinauli11@gmail.com, Orcid: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4449-7138
b PhD in Communication Studies, Department of Communication Studies, Universitas Sumatera Utara, Medan, Indonesia, Corresponding, E-mail: humaizi@usu.ac.id, Orcid: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8520-9724
c PhD in Communication Studies, Department of Communication Studies, Universitas Sumatera Utara, Medan, Indonesia, E-mail: dr.iskandarzulkarnain@gmail.com, Orcid: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9233-8150
d PhD in Communication Studies, Department of Communication Studies, Universitas Sumatera Utara, Medan, Indonesia, E-mail: f.rina61@yahoo.co.id, Orcid: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8899-2857
CRUCIAL CRISIS ESTRATÉGIAS DE COMUNICAÇÃO NA ABORDAGEM DE CONFLITOS TERRESTRES: UM ESTUDO DE CASO NO DESENVOLVIMENTO DE TOBA CALDERA RESORT NA INDONÉSIA

RESUMO

Objetivo: Este estudo analisa os processos de comunicação entre a Agência da Autoridade do Lago Toba (BPODT) e a comunidade indígena Sigapiton no que diz respeito ao conflito de terra em meio ao desenvolvimento do Toba Caldera Resort (TCR).

Método: Empregando metodologia qualitativa envolvendo observações, entrevistas e triangulação de dados, a pesquisa avalia as estratégias de comunicação e seu impacto sobre os stakeholders.

Resultado: as descobertas revelam lacunas de comunicação significativas entre o BPODT e a comunidade Sigapiton. A comunicação do BPODT carece de informação, relevância para os interesses da comunidade, consistência na transmissão de benefícios e transparência sobre os impactos positivos e negativos do desenvolvimento do TCR. Esta deficiência na comunicação leva a conflitos decorrentes de diferentes interpretações de mensagens, especialmente no que diz respeito à aquisição de terras.

Conclusão: Este estudo conclui que a necessidade do BPODT de melhorar a comunicação da responsabilidade social corporativa, garantindo a informatividade, relevância, consistência e transparência. Salienta a importância de uma mensagem objetiva e baseada em fatos e a necessidade de alinhamento com os interesses da comunidade para a resolução sustentável de conflitos e uma maior participação das partes interessadas.

Palavras-chave: agência de autoridade lago toba (bpodt), estratégias de comunicação de crise, conflito de terra, responsabilidade social corporativa.

1 INTRODUCTION

As a tourism area, Lake Toba, commonly called the Toba Caldera Resort (TCR), is professionally managed by the Lake Toba Authority Agency (BPODT). This institution is responsible for developing Lake Toba as a super-priority tourist destination, as stipulated by Presidential Regulation No. 49 of 2016, with an investment of Rp 26 trillion. The CEO of BPODT, Jimmi Bernardo Panjaitan, has planned various international facilities within TCR in 2022, such as hotels, plazas, main gates, ravine gates, parking hubs, mosques, churches, fire station buildings, culture centers, GEO Parks, amphitheaters, SME Centers, Tourism Academies, and a glass bridge (Sumutpos.com).

BPODT has encountered obstacles in Lake Toba's development, including environmental issues, poor government and community communication, and vehicle tonnage restrictions (Warsito, detiknews.com). One of the conflicts revolves around the land status in Sigapiton, where the Sigapiton indigenous community claims ownership of some land earmarked for TCR. The conflict between BPODT and the Sigapiton
community arises from individual ambitions and inconsistent communication, which is irrational, emotional, and sentimental, thus sparking misunderstandings. The Sigapiton indigenous community refuses to vacate their land, believing that the TCR development disrupts the existence of wilderness and water sources crucial to their customs. They perceive this land as belonging to their ancestors, holding sacred value, referred to as 'nabolon'—an ancestral gift from the Almighty God to the Siraja Batak. This belief has led the Sigapiton village community to express concerns and reject the imposed status (Simanungkalit, 1997).

This conflict reached a communication crisis point when the community protested against the development and encroachment upon their ancestral territory—a pivotal moment occurred when the head of the Sigapiton village allegedly signed an agreement with BPODT, triggering community outrage. The Sigapiton indigenous community took measures, such as sending objection letters to various entities, including the Forestry Service and the Toba Regional House of Representatives. Despite attempts to clarify their customary territory's boundaries, the conflict persisted as the community continued to reject what they considered an encroachment upon their ancestral lands. The uncertainty surrounding the Sigapiton land status has created a communication crisis between BPODT and the Sigapiton indigenous community. BPODT faces demands to proceed with tourism development while the community feels their rights are being neglected. This crisis threatens BPODT's reputation and disrupts its operations.

In managing this crisis, BPODT needs to employ effective crisis management. They must maintain their legitimacy by providing consistent crisis responses to stakeholders. Effective crisis communication should reduce uncertainty, avoid speculation, and uphold transparency. BPODT has attempted communication with the community through consultations, yet these efforts failed to reach a consensus. The community perceives the compensation offered by BPODT as inadequate for the losses they have suffered, both material and immaterial, including the loss of their ancestral land. BPODT's communication failures prompted the community to pursue legal avenues concerning the land dispute. As the linchpin in accelerating tourism development at Lake Toba, BPODT should demonstrate its presence in the best manner to stakeholders while upholding its reputation as a trusted implementing body for Lake Toba's development.

BPODT's crisis stems from observing the external system and assessing the organization's surrounding environment by communication contributors. Despite
BPODT’s persuasive communication efforts towards the Sigapiton indigenous community regarding vacating land within The Caldera Resort area, the community persists in rejection. Organizational crises significantly impact an organization and its public, products, and reputation (Fearnbanks in Kriyantono, 2015). This conflict also reflects the cultural complexity influencing communication and crisis management, wherein cultural communication requires both traditional and newer approaches (Godfrey in Steele, 2020). Understanding cultural values, norms, and beliefs is crucial in designing effective communication strategies to address conflicts between BPODT and the Sigapiton indigenous community at Lake Toba.

Crisis management within crisis communication strategies must consider cultural aspects in implementation and planning (Wertz & Kim, 2010; Oliveira, 2010; Holst, 2012; Cheng, Donyale, Vinita, 2013; Yu & Wen, 2003). In crisis management, values and norms are utilized as efficient strategies to respond to the needs of the local population (Swedish Emergency Management Agency, 2008). Mazurek (2021) further emphasizes that culture is a crucial element that cannot be ignored and significantly aids in understanding the environment where the crisis unfolds.

Previous research by Oliveira (2010) has demonstrated that crises emerge and are resolved through communication, and cultural values greatly influence how companies respond to crises. This study explains that cultural diversity knowledge is a prerequisite for entering society and can be leveraged as a crisis management strategy. According to Carlson, Jakli, & Linos (2018), crisis management within government institutions directly correlates with the effectiveness of disseminating information to all stakeholders. This dissemination effectiveness refers to understanding the evolving local context and culture. Ingenoff & Christopher (2012) highlight that culture is the core and primary determinant of crisis management, requiring local adjustments where institutions operate. This aspect is particularly emphasized in public relations strategies.

Moreover, according to Coombs (2007), as cited in Kriyantono (2012), crisis communication has become the responsibility of public relations, seen as information managers and advisors supporting crisis management (Mykkanen & Vos, 2015). Lesenciucl & Daniela (2008) delve deeper into explaining that crisis communication strategies are designed in alignment with public relations strategies. Public relations practitioners are integral to crisis management teams, particularly in preparing spokespersons to handle media inquiries (Coombs, 2017). Public relations are crucial in
formulating and implementing communication strategies, particularly crisis management. Hence, this research focuses on crisis management to discover crisis communication strategies.

While BPODT cannot avoid the crisis, it can anticipate and mitigate its negative impacts to preserve organizational reputation and community trust. Crisis management is essential in preparing various strategies and tactics to handle crises. Public relations, employing crisis communication designed to (1) reduce the risk of public panic, (2) alleviate public concerns, (3) minimize speculations, especially at the onset of a crisis, (4) shield the company from speculative criticisms arising from public discourse in mass media, (5) maintain accountability, disclosure, and balanced-interest-based communication, and (6) minimize damage to the organization's image (Kriyantono, 2012:189).

The crisis during the accelerated development of Lake Toba as a super-priority area involves a vital role for BPODT. They possess regulatory panels and direct policies that can be enacted. Effective crisis communication is crucial in handling conflicts with the Sigapiton indigenous community to support smooth organizational operations and enhance the organization's image. Various stakeholders must understand the importance of crisis communication in clarifying crucial aspects. Effective crisis communication strategies by BPODT are pivotal in maximizing organizational operations.

This research emphasizes BPODT's crisis communication strategies in handling land conflicts with the Sigapiton indigenous community within The Caldera Resort area, Ajibata District, Toba Regency, North Sumatra Province. Evaluating an organization's adaptation to its environment serves as a lesson that enriches knowledge from organizational and societal perspectives. This study fills gaps in communication science, mainly regarding an organization's crisis communication strategies in conflict resolution. As stated by Habermas, effective communication represents an instrumental and strategic form of communication. This seems to be a fundamental idea underlying crisis communication studies: if an organization can manage its communication effectively, it can overcome any crisis while maintaining its reputation and not impeding its mission. Like previous studies and most related literature, this study discusses field experiences to illustrate how an organization should manage problems and communicate concerning occurring crises. So, this study scrutinizes the communication processes between the
Lake Toba Authority Agency (BPODT) and the Sigapiton indigenous community concerning land conflict amid Toba Caldera Resort's (TCR) development.

2 METHOD

This research adopts a qualitative approach that emphasizes the process and meaning not rigorously examined or measured in terms of quantity, intensity, or frequency (Denzin & Lincoln, 2009: 6). The researcher prioritizes an investigation rich in values and seeks answers to questions that highlight how social experiences emerge along with their acquired meanings. This viewpoint is supported by Salim (2006: 36), who does not privilege one method over another. The researcher employs a constructive, multidimensional approach involving interacting and exchanging social experiences interpreted through critical informants. Data collection involves various techniques, including observation, in-depth interviews, documentation, and data triangulation. Research data are obtained by collecting sentences or words from informants, books, and other sources—interviews conducted by the researcher aid in gathering more profound insights into informant interpretations.

3 RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The communication process between BPODT and the Sigapiton indigenous community generates conflict. Conflict in communication often arises from messages conveyed in various message exchange activities, be it in interpersonal, intergroup, group, media, or mass communication. According to the researcher's findings, BPODT's communication significantly impacts message interpretation for the Sigapiton indigenous community. Communication efforts by BPODT continue to create disparities and ongoing conflicts. This is primarily due to differing interpretations of messages between the communicators and recipients. BPODT's messages still evoke emotions within the receiving environment, particularly the Sigapiton indigenous community. Continuous messages from BPODT containing implicit pressure continually lead to various prolonged socio-cultural conflicts. However, fundamentally, humans inherently live in an informative manner.

Based on the above, BPODT needs to realize that the function of its communication should fulfill certain functions within social communication groups, as outlined by Susanto (1985): (1) raising awareness among the public about side effects
occuring during the development process, which could be avoided if desired by the people; (2) providing a way of life for citizens in a country, particularly establishing social-cultural infrastructure that supports and resolves negative consequences from the development process; (3) establishing a value system, skills, and modern attitudes for the community to follow.

Communication conflicts can manifest in various forms of message transmission, according to Effendy's communication models (1995:7), particularly in the case of BPODT and the Sigapiton indigenous community's group communication. Based on this communication model, conflicts can arise from the message exchange process for each communicating component. Effendy (1989:61) perceives communication in various natures, including cognitive, affective, or conative effects that arise in individuals or groups due to the communicated messages.

Cognitive effects in BPODT's communication relate to changing the mindset of the Sigapiton indigenous community regarding messages conveyed by BPODT. Subsequently, these changes in attitude foster conative effects associated with efforts that eventually translate into actions or behaviors. The nature of the effects of communication activities can lead to consequences based on the outcomes derived from the communication process, as communication activities yield various impacts on communicators, messages, and recipients. Liliweri (1999) explains that every communication process culminates in an outcome known as an effect. This effect affects the recipient, intentionally or unintentionally, as a consequence of the communication process. Therefore, BPODT must consider effective corporate social responsibility communication to achieve positive effects in the communication process. Effective corporate social responsibility communication is defined as communication conducted by a company that enhances cognitive and affective assessments of the public toward the company and its social responsibility practices (Kim, 2019; Kim & Ferguson, 2018; Morsing, 2006).

According to Morsing and Beckmann, corporate social responsibility communication is an effort to convey and receive messages from stakeholders regarding the company's commitments, policies, programs, and performance in economic, environmental, and social pillars (as cited in Jalal, 2010). Therefore, BPODT needs to consider elements of its corporate social responsibility communication to achieve this goal, as suggested by Kim and Rim (2019).
1. The informativeness of social responsibility communication, based on the researcher's findings from observations and interviews, reveals that BPODT has not conducted informative communication, as evidenced by the community's lack of clarity regarding the status of Sigapiton land and the benefits accruing to the community from the development of TCR. According to Kim and Rim, corporate social responsibility communication should be informative, explaining BPODT's efforts toward its social responsibility, such as potential impacts on the Sigapiton indigenous community, third-party support in development, and information encompassing the beneficiaries of corporate social responsibility.

2. Personal relevance refers to the message relevance of corporate social responsibility communication with the lives and personal interests of the community. Messages conveyed by BPODT to the Sigapiton indigenous community lack relevance concerning the community's life interests. This assertion aligns with the researcher's findings from observations and interviews. BPODT's messages still emphasize its rights over Sigapiton land for TCR development without considering its responsibility toward the affected community's life, where agricultural and residential lands are being taken over.

3. Consistency pertains to how steadfastly a company communicates its social responsibility efforts. Based on the researcher's findings, BPODT lacks consistency in conveying the benefits of TCR development to the community. This assertion is supported by interviews with the Sigapiton indigenous community, demanding clarity from BPODT regarding the advantages of TCR development for the community.

4. Transparency indicates the openness in disclosing information regarding a company's social responsibility, encompassing both the positive and negative aspects. The Sigapiton indigenous community has not felt BPODT's transparency regarding the positive and negative impacts. According to the researcher's findings, the community perceives a lack of openness from BPODT regarding TCR development-related information. BPODT tends to act more discreetly without conducting proper socialization.

5. Objectivity refers to whether corporate social responsibility messages are based on factual information. The Sigapiton community feels that BPODT lacks objectivity in its communication. This aligns with the researcher's findings, where
BPODT previously requested minimal access for TCR development when landowners had already agreed. However, all agricultural lands were bulldozed and taken over covertly.

4 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study has illuminated the intricate communication processes between the Lake Toba Authority Agency (BPODT) and the Sigapiton indigenous community amidst the development of Toba Caldera Resort (TCR). The communication dynamics have manifested in conflict, rooted in differing interpretations of messages and ongoing disparities. The impact of BPODT’s communication on the Sigapiton community extends beyond cognitive effects, influencing attitudes and behaviors. The identified conflicts in communication, as outlined by Effendy’s communication models, underscore the need for a strategic approach to address cognitive, affective, and conative effects. Notably, BPODT's communication must be mindful of corporate social responsibility principles to achieve positive outcomes. Effective corporate social responsibility communication, characterized by informativeness, personal relevance, consistency, transparency, and objectivity, is essential for fostering understanding and cooperation.

The study's findings reveal that BPODT's communication has fallen short in several aspects of corporate social responsibility. The lack of informative communication has left the community uncertain about the status of Sigapiton land and the benefits accruing from TCR development. Messages from BPODT have been perceived as lacking personal relevance, consistency, transparency, and objectivity, contributing to the persistence of conflicts. To mitigate these issues, BPODT should reevaluate and enhance its communication strategies. It is imperative for BPODT to adopt a more informative approach, providing clarity on the status of Sigapiton land and the associated benefits for the community. Messages should be crafted with personal relevance, emphasizing the positive impacts on the community's life interests. Consistency, transparency, and objectivity must be prioritized to build trust and understanding. In essence, the successful resolution of conflicts necessitates a communication paradigm that aligns with the principles of corporate social responsibility. BPODT's commitment to transparent, informative, and relevant communication is paramount in fostering a cooperative and mutually beneficial relationship with the Sigapiton indigenous community, ultimately contributing to sustainable and harmonious development in the region.
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