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Community Relations Strategy at PT Tirta Investama (Danone-Aqua) in Building a Social License to Operate through a Community Empowerment-Based Agroforestry Program

[1]Vira Indah Nugraini, [1]Maylina Cahyaningtyas, [1]Pramudya Ibnu Subrata*
Corresponding Author: *udapramudya12@gmail.com
[1] Universitas Slamet Riyadi, Surakarta, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This study develops a conceptual framework explaining how community relations strategies contribute to building a social license to operate (SLO) through an agroforestry-based community empowerment program implemented by PT Tirta Investama (Danone-Aqua). The rapid growth of Indonesia's bottled water industry has raised concerns regarding environmental impacts and unequal access to water resources. Consequently, companies in natural resource-based sectors must not only comply with formal regulations but also secure social acceptance from local communities. This study adopts a conceptual approach using a systematic literature review, integrating perspectives from public relations (PR), stakeholder theory, legitimacy theory, and SLO. Data were collected from scientific journals, academic books, institutional reports, and company documents related to community relations and sustainability practices. The analysis employs concept mapping and theoretical synthesis to examine relationships among community engagement, dialogic communication, trust building, social legitimacy, and public acceptance. The findings indicate that community relations strategies emphasizing two-way communication, transparency, and active participation enhance community involvement, strengthen trust, and foster social legitimacy. Agroforestry-based empowerment programs function as collaborative mechanisms that generate shared value for both companies and communities. Thus, community relations serve not only as a communication strategy for reputation building but also

as a critical mechanism for obtaining and sustaining SLO, ultimately supporting long-term operational sustainability.

Keywords
Agroforestry Program
Community Engagement
Community Relations
Corporate Legitimacy
Public Relations Strategy
Social License

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Introduction

The bottled drinking water (BDW) industry in Indonesia has demonstrated significant growth, with a stable annual increase of 5–8% driven by the rising demand for safe and practical water access [1]. With a market value projected to reach USD 3.9 billion by 2025, this sector has become a vital component of modern water supply systems [2]. However, this expansion relies heavily on natural water resources, raising public concern over groundwater extraction and environmental sustainability. Government and public discourse increasingly emphasize that companies must balance extraction with conservation to mitigate long-term ecological impacts [3]. In the framework of organizational communication, firms are now required to build social legitimacy through sustainable management and strong relationships with local communities [4].

PT Tirta Investama, as a market leader with over 40% share, operates numerous facilities that utilize natural springs across Indonesia [1]. This large-scale operation places the company in direct interaction with local communities, where perceptions of water resource utilization often influence social dynamics [5]. Research indicates that corporate dominance over water sources can lead to concerns regarding access inequality and ecological impacts [6], [7]. Consequently, community relations is no longer just a communication function but a strategic necessity for organizational survival. Under stakeholder theory, local communities are primary actors whose aspirations must be integrated through dialogue and participatory engagement to create shared value [8], [9]. This interaction is fundamental to obtaining a social license to operate and ensuring long-term operational sustainability [10], [11].

Despite its urgency, PR research has traditionally focused on general corporate communication and reputation management, leaving a gap in studies specifically addressing community relations within resource-based industries [12], [13]. While the concept of organization–public relationships is established, its application to the context of local communities and social legitimacy remains limited [13]. This article aims to bridge this gap by

developing a conceptual framework that explains how strategic community relations can foster social acceptance [14], [15]. By integrating PR perspectives with the concept of a social license to operate, this study offers a model for managing social impacts and building public trust [16], [17]. Ultimately, this framework provides a theoretical basis for future empirical research on how participatory communication secures a company's social legitimacy and operational longevity [18], [19].

Literature Review

A. Concepts of Public Relations

PR in modern organizations is understood as a managerial function focused on managing communication between an organization and its publics. Traditionally defined as a communication management process linking an organization to various interest groups, it has evolved into a strategic function that helps management understand the external environment and build mutually beneficial relationships [20], [21]. This perspective asserts that PR is not merely a promotional tool but a strategic instrument used to build reputation, manage public perception, and maintain social legitimacy amidst complex environmental dynamics [22].

The role of strategic communication in PR is also perceived as a vital mechanism for building stakeholder relationships. Within a strategic management perspective, PR communication is utilized to identify the interests of various public groups, manage potential conflicts, and create a dialogue that aligns organizational goals with societal expectations [22]. This approach involves systematic research, planning, and evaluation to ensure that organizational policies are acceptable to key stakeholders. Consequently, strategic communication serves as a tool to enhance organizational effectiveness while strengthening long-term relationships with stakeholders who influence the organization's sustainability [20], [22].

B. Concept of Community Relations

Community relations is a core function of PR that focuses on establishing harmonious relationships between an organization and the society surrounding its operational areas. It is defined as a planned, active, and sustainable participation of an organization within a community to improve the social environment while providing mutual benefits for both parties [23]. This approach positions the community as a strategic stakeholder with a direct interest in the company's activities. Therefore, the relationship is characterized by interdependence, where organizational actions directly affect the social, economic, and cultural conditions of the local population [14].

In practice, community relations is built through components emphasizing two-way communication, community involvement, and long-term relationship development. Two-way communication is fundamental as it allows both parties to exchange information, understand

respective interests, and build continuous trust [21]. Furthermore, quality relationships are fostered through openness, commitment, and active participation in community development [24]. The ultimate goal extends beyond positive image-making to community empowerment and social conflict management, ensuring that the company gains public trust and long-term operational sustainability [25], [26].

C. Stakeholder Theory

Stakeholder Theory provides a framework for understanding the relationship between a firm and various parties interested in its activities. Introduced by R. Edward Freeman, the theory posits that a stakeholder is any individual or group that can affect or is affected by the achievement of an organization's objectives [8]. Consequently, a corporation is responsible not only to its shareholders but also to employees, customers, suppliers, and the local communities surrounding its operations [9]. This perspective views the organization as a social entity whose success depends on its ability to manage these diverse relationships in a balanced and sustainable manner.

Within this framework, local communities are positioned as primary stakeholders, especially in industries reliant on natural resources. As the parties most directly impacted by a company's social, economic, and environmental footprint, their support is strategic in determining the firm’s social legitimacy. Research indicates that effective engagement with local stakeholders enhances corporate legitimacy and strengthens social support for business activities [9]. Accommodating community interests through communication, participation, and collaboration creates shared value and ensures stronger operational sustainability in the long run [8].

D. Legitimacy Theory

Legitimacy Theory explains the relationship between organizations and society based on the perception that an entity's actions are desirable, proper, or appropriate within a socially constructed system of norms and values [27]. Organizations operate under a social contract, where their survival is contingent upon the alignment of their business activities with societal expectations [27]. This theory emphasizes that legitimacy is a strategic resource; if a gap arises between organizational actions and social values, the resulting legitimacy gap can threaten a company's reputation and its very existence [19].

Communication plays a pivotal role in bridging this gap by demonstrating that a company's operations are consistent with societal norms. Legitimacy is not only a product of action but also of how those actions are communicated through transparency, social disclosures, and stakeholder dialogue [19]. By utilizing strategic communication, PR serves as an instrument to shape public perception and ensure that the organization remains socially acceptable. Effective

communication thus helps maintain the social trust and access to resources necessary for the organization to sustain its operations over time [19], [27].

E. Social license to operate (SLO)

Social License to Operate (SLO) refers to the level of social acceptance or approval granted by local communities and stakeholders to a company's activities. Unlike formal government permits, an SLO is intangible and resides in the perceptions and trust of the community [10], [28]. The concept emerged from the realization that regulatory compliance alone is insufficient to guarantee operational continuity without community support [11]. Defined as the ongoing approval based on credibility and trust, SLO is essential for managing the social risks and benefits associated with resource-intensive projects [29], [30].

Community relations serves as the strategic mechanism to secure and maintain this social license. Through two-way communication and community involvement, companies can build the social capital required for acceptance. Research in PR suggests that the quality of the organization-stakeholder relationship is the primary determinant in obtaining, maintaining, or even restoring a lost social license [30]. By responding effectively to community values and expectations, an organization can foster the trust necessary to transform local communities from potential critics into supportive partners [17], [31].

F. Community Engagement

Community engagement is a participatory process that involves citizens in organizational activities through ongoing interaction and collaboration. It is defined as a cooperative process where organizations and communities exchange knowledge and resources to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes [32]. In this dynamic, the community is not merely a passive recipient of corporate programs but an active partner involved in the planning and evaluation of initiatives [32]. This participatory approach ensures that the community's aspirations and needs are meaningfully integrated into corporate policies [33].

Effective engagement models range from simple information sharing to active collaboration and shared decision-making. By adopting these participatory models, companies move from one-way communication to a dialogic relationship that fosters mutual understanding [32]. Studies show that active community involvement strengthens public trust, enhances social legitimacy, and minimizes the potential for social conflict [33], [34]. Furthermore, engagement promotes a sense of local ownership over corporate social programs, which in turn reinforces the long-term bond between the company and the community [16], [34].

Material and Methods

This study was designed as a conceptual research aimed at developing a theoretical framework explaining how community relations strategies contribute to the development of a

social license to operate through a community empowerment–based agroforestry program implemented by PT Tirta Investama. A conceptual approach was employed because it enables the integration of theoretical perspectives from PR, stakeholder management, and corporate sustainability to construct a systematic analytical model that can be empirically examined in future studies. Rather than collecting primary data, the research relied on the analysis of documented phenomena and scholarly discussions concerning corporate–community relationships in resource-dependent industries, particularly the bottled water sector, where issues of water governance and environmental legitimacy have increasingly attracted public attention and regulatory scrutiny [1], [35]. Within this framework, the conceptual design allowed the synthesis of interdisciplinary literature to explain how dialogue, trust formation, and legitimacy processes contribute to corporate acceptance within local communities.

The data sources consisted of a systematic literature review including peer-reviewed international journal articles, academic books, institutional reports, and publicly available corporate publications related to community relations practices and sustainable water governance. Priority was given to publications discussing relationship management in PR, stakeholder theory, legitimacy theory, and the concept of social license to operate, which are widely recognized as key frameworks for analyzing corporate–community interaction in extractive and resource-based industries [5], [33]. Additional contextual information was obtained from sustainability reports and publicly accessible organizational documents describing environmental and community empowerment initiatives implemented in Indonesia's bottled water industry. Literature selection was guided by several criteria, including topical relevance to community relations, theoretical contribution to organizational–PR studies, and publication within reputable academic databases. Through this process, major constructs such as community engagement, dialogic communication, trust formation, perceived legitimacy, and social license to operate were identified and synthesized into a coherent analytical framework [1], [36].

The analytical procedure was conducted using conceptual analysis and theoretical synthesis to examine relationships among the identified constructs. Initially, key concepts within the literature were mapped to understand their theoretical interconnections and their relevance to corporate communication strategies aimed at fostering community engagement. Subsequently, the findings from the reviewed literature were integrated into a conceptual model illustrating how community relations initiatives—particularly those embedded in empowerment-oriented agroforestry programs—may contribute to the development of trust and social legitimacy among local stakeholders. Through deductive reasoning, it was proposed that participatory engagement and dialogic communication enhance trust between corporations and communities, which in turn strengthens perceived legitimacy and ultimately

supports the establishment of a social license to operate [33], [36]. The resulting conceptual model therefore positions community relations as a strategic communication mechanism capable of facilitating long-term, mutually beneficial relationships between corporations and local communities.

Results and Discussions

A. The Role of Community Relations in Natural Resources Based Industries

The Industries based on the utilization of natural resources possess unique characteristics because their operations depend heavily on environmental assets such as water, minerals, and energy. These industrial activities are typically located near local communities, making interaction between the company and society inevitable. In this context, natural resources are viewed not only as economic factors but as part of a socio-environmental system that directly affects the livelihoods of local populations [36]. Consequently, governing ini industries involves addressing complex social challenges, including the distribution of economic benefits, environmental protection, and the rights of local communities toward the resources in their territory [6], [36]. Moreover, effective governance in these industries requires integrating environmental stewardship with social responsibility, ensuring equitable benefit sharing, protecting local ecosystems, and recognizing community rights to foster sustainable development and long-term acceptance of industrial activities.

Public sensitivity toward resource exploitation often increases when industrial activities are perceived to negatively impact the environment or social welfare. Research indicates that conflicts between companies and communities frequently arise from perceptions of injustice in resource utilization, lack of public participation in decision-making, and low corporate transparency regarding operational impacts [5]. Cases of social conflict in Indonesia's extractive sectors demonstrate that public distrust can trigger social resistance and the rejection of industrial projects [5]. Such conflicts emphasize that a lack of communication and community involvement can expand the gap between companies, governments, and local communities. Furthermore, these conditions highlight the urgency for companies to adopt inclusive communication approaches, strengthen stakeholder engagement, and ensure transparency in operations to mitigate distrust, prevent conflict escalation, and foster more constructive relationships with local communities. In this context, integrating participatory governance mechanisms becomes essential to align corporate practices with community expectations and sustainable development goals.

Table 1 summarizes the socio-environmental characteristics of natural resource industries and highlights how dependency on environmental assets and community proximity creates potential conflicts, emphasizing the need for inclusive governance and transparent engagement.

Table 1. The Role of Community Relations in Natural Resources-Based Industries

Key Aspect	Description	Implication
Socio-environmental dependency	Natural resource industries rely heavily on environmental assets and operate close to communities, making interactions unavoidable and positioning resources as integral parts of local socio-environmental and economic systems.	Companies must consider not only economic goals but also environmental sustainability and social welfare, ensuring fair resource distribution and respecting community rights to maintain stable operational conditions.
Conflict potential	Public sensitivity increases when resource exploitation harms the environment or society, often leading to conflicts due to perceived injustice, lack of participation, and limited transparency in corporate operations.	Without proper communication and engagement, distrust may escalate into resistance, highlighting the importance of inclusive decision-making and transparent information sharing to prevent prolonged social conflicts.

B. Corporate Community Relations Strategies

The Corporate community relations strategies are generally implemented through open communication practices between the organization and the surrounding society. In industries with significant social and environmental footprints, transparent communication is an essential mechanism for building a shared understanding of company activities, potential impacts, and local benefits. Through dialogue processes, public consultations, and clear information sharing, community engagement can be increased, thereby minimizing potential social conflicts [37]. Furthermore, relationships established through participatory communication are believed to strengthen a company's long-term social legitimacy [29].

Beyond open communication, community relations strategies include community empowerment programs, social conflict management, and resource transparency. Empowerment initiatives, such as local economic development and skill training, are used to improve the welfare of those living near operational sites, transforming the community from affected parties into development partners [18]. Simultaneously, social conflict is managed through dialogue, mediation, and participatory problem-solving to prevent the escalation of tensions. Transparency in resource use has also become vital as communities increasingly demand corporate accountability for the environmental and social impacts of natural resource-based industries [18], [31]. Additionally, these integrated strategies strengthen mutual trust between companies and communities, enabling more inclusive decision-making processes, enhancing social acceptance, and ultimately contributing to the long-term sustainability and legitimacy of corporate operations in resource-dependent environments.

Table 2 outlines key community relations strategies, focusing on transparent communication and empowerment initiatives, demonstrating how participatory approaches and conflict management mechanisms contribute to reducing tensions and fostering sustainable company–community relationships.

Table 2. Corporate Community Relations Strategies

Strategy	Description	Expected Outcome
Transparent communication	Companies implement open and dialogic communication through consultations and information sharing, enabling communities to better understand operational impacts, benefits, and corporate intentions in resource-based industries.	This approach enhances mutual understanding, reduces misinformation, and minimizes social conflict risks while fostering stronger relationships and long-term social legitimacy for company operations.
Community empowerment and conflict management	Strategies include economic empowerment programs, skill development, participatory problem-solving, and mediation to involve communities as partners while addressing tensions and ensuring accountability in resource use.	These initiatives improve community welfare, strengthen collaboration, reduce conflict escalation, and promote shared value creation between companies and local communities in sustainable development contexts.

C. Implications for Public Relations

The evolving social dynamics and increasing public demand for corporate accountability have significantly shifted the role of public relations (PR) within organizations. PR practices that were previously one-way and publication-oriented are now increasingly directed toward two-way communication grounded in active stakeholder engagement. In modern communication perspectives, organizations are expected not only to deliver messages but also to listen to public aspirations, concerns, and feedback through participatory and dialogic processes [26]. This shift reflects the growing importance of transparency, inclusiveness, and responsiveness in organizational communication. Research shows that PR practices emphasizing stakeholder engagement can enhance public trust, strengthen mutual understanding, and support the development of sustainable and collaborative relationships between companies and communities [10], [26], [33].

Another critical implication for PR practice is the necessity of building long-term relationships with the community as part of an organizational sustainability strategy. The bond between a company and society is no longer seen as a transient instrumental interaction but as a strategic relation that must be maintained continuously [40]. In this capacity, PR serves as the bridge for building trust, facilitating dialogue, and managing social issues surrounding corporate activities. Through community engagement, organizations can understand societal expectations and integrate social interests into corporate policies, thereby strengthening organizational reputation and supporting the achievement of a social license to operate [16], [23]. Moreover, sustained engagement enables organizations to proactively anticipate emerging social risks, adapt communication strategies to evolving community needs, and reinforce collaborative partnerships that enhance resilience, legitimacy, and long-term alignment between corporate objectives and societal expectations.

Table 3 presents the evolving role of PR, emphasizing the shift toward two-way communication and long-term relationship building, which enhances trust, strengthens legitimacy, and supports achieving a sustainable social license to operate.

Table 3. Implications for Public Relations

PR Dimension	Description	Impact
Shift to two-way communication	Public relations practices have evolved from one-way messaging to participatory engagement, emphasizing listening, dialogue, and stakeholder involvement in addressing community concerns and expectations.	This transformation increases trust, strengthens relationships, and supports collaborative interactions between organizations and communities, contributing to more effective and responsive corporate communication strategies.
Long-term relationship building	PR focuses on sustaining continuous relationships with communities by facilitating dialogue, addressing social issues, and integrating public interests into organizational decision-making processes.	Strong relationships enhance corporate reputation, support social legitimacy, and help organizations secure and maintain a social license to operate for long-term sustainability.

Conclusion

Based on the conceptual discussion, it can be concluded that community relations practice plays a strategic role in supporting corporate operational sustainability, particularly in industries directly linked to natural resources and local communities. From a modern PR perspective, the relationship between a company and its community is understood as a continuous communication process to build trust, social legitimacy, and public acceptance of organizational activities. Through the integration of stakeholder theory, legitimacy theory, and the social license to operate, the company–community relationship is recognized as a social mechanism that determines the level of public acceptance of corporate actions. The conceptual model developed in this article confirms that an effective community relations strategy will enhance community engagement, strengthen public trust, and contribute to the formation of a social license to operate, which is a critical factor for long-term organizational sustainability.

Implications and Suggestions

Despite The evolving social dynamics and increasing public demand for corporate accountability have shifted the role of PR within organizations. PR practices that were previously one-way and publication-oriented are now increasingly directed toward two-way communication based on stakeholder engagement. In modern communication perspectives, organizations are expected not only to deliver messages but to listen to public aspirations and concerns through participatory dialogue. Research shows that PR practices emphasizing stakeholder engagement can increase public trust and support collaborative relationships between companies and communities.

Future Another critical implication for PR practice is the necessity of building long-term relationships with the community as part of an organizational sustainability strategy. The

bond between a company and society is no longer seen as a transient instrumental interaction but as a strategic relation that must be maintained continuously. In this capacity, PR serves as the bridge for building trust, facilitating dialogue, and managing social issues surrounding corporate activities. Through community engagement, organizations can understand societal expectations and integrate social interests into corporate policies, thereby strengthening organizational reputation and supporting the achievement of a social license to operate.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this research.

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Authors



Vira Indah Nugraini is an active undergraduate student in the Management Study Program at the Faculty of Economics and Business, Universitas Slamet Riyadi, Surakarta. Her research interests focus on corporate financial planning, strategic business management, and organizational communication. Bedicated to exploring how public relations functions serve as a strategic mechanism in building social license to operate (SLO) and maintaining corporate legitimacy, she actively examines the intersection between community empowerment and industrial sustainability. (email: indahvira37@gmail.com).



Maylina Cahyaningtyas is an active undergraduate student in the Management Study Program at the Faculty of Economics and Business, Universitas Slamet Riyadi, Surakarta. Her research interests focus on corporate financial planning, strategic business management, and organizational communication. Bedicated to exploring how public relations functions serve as a strategic mechanism in building social license to operate (SLO) and maintaining corporate legitimacy, she actively examines the intersection between community empowerment and industrial sustainability. (email: chyaning27@gmail.com).



Pramudya Ibnu Subrata is an academic and practitioner in management with degrees in Telecommunication and Informatics Business Management and a Master's in Management (Digital Marketing) from Telkom University. He is currently pursuing a Doctoral degree in Economics (Management) at Universitas Sebelas Maret. His expertise includes startups and digital business strategies. He has teaching experience in marketing and economic mathematics, leadership roles in student organizations, QRMO certification, and national-level sports achievements. (email: udapramudya12@gmail.com).