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UNVEILING PSEUDO-PARTICIPATION: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF EMPOWERMENT COMMUNICATION IN PT KILANG PERTAMINA INTERNATIONAL'S CSR PROGRAMS

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ABSTRACT

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programs have become a strategic instrument for companies in high-risk industrial sectors, such as oil and gas, to manage social stability and obtain a Social License to Operate (SLO). The dominant paradigm in current CSR implementation is community empowerment, which theoretically requires genuine public participation. However, this article argues that behind the rhetoric of participation, many CSR communication practices actually perpetuate forms of pseudo-participation. This research aims to critically analyze how communication models implemented in CSR programs considered "successful" – in this case, the program at PT Kilang Pertamina Internasional (KPI) which achieved PROPER Gold Ranking – can reproduce tokenistic participation mechanisms. Using a qualitative method and an embedded collective case study approach across three operational units (Sungai Pakning, Plaju, and Kasim), this research deeply examines the communication process at each stage of the program cycle. The main findings indicate that community participation, although appearing high during the implementation phase (as implementers or workers), is significantly weak and superficial during the strategic planning and program evaluation phases. Participation is reduced to mere consultation or placation, aligning with tokenistic levels on Arnstein's ladder of participation. This mechanism is perpetuated by a communication model that, in practice, remains top-down and asymmetrical, with companies maintaining complete control over the agenda-setting process, resource allocation, and the definition of "success." This article concludes that this pseudo-participation, while efficient for achieving compliance targets (PROPER) and maintaining SLOs, fails to generate genuine community independence and potentially creates new dependencies and latent social friction.

KEYWORDS: Tokenism; Pseudo-Participation; CSR Communication; Community Empowerment; Social License to Operate; Indonesia; Critical Case Study.

1. INTRODUCTION

The practice of Social and Environmental Responsibility, or Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), has undergone a fundamental evolution in recent decades, both in global discourse and in the context of implementation in Indonesia. CSR is no longer viewed as a voluntary act of charitable philanthropy, but has transformed into a strategic, ethical, and legal necessity for corporations. In Indonesia, this transformation is driven by formal regulations such as Law No. 40 of 2007 concerning Limited Liability Companies, as well as increasing stakeholder demands for corporate social and environmental accountability. For companies operating in high-risk extractive industries, such as oil and gas, CSR plays a more crucial role. It is a key instrument for managing social risks, mitigating potential conflicts, and most importantly, for obtaining and maintaining legitimacy or what is known as a Social License to Operate (SLO) from the communities around its operational areas. Without a stable SLO, the operations of a high-value company can be threatened. PT Kilang Pertamina Internasional (PT KPI), as the entity managing national strategic oil refineries, is right at the epicenter of this challenge.

Along with this strategic shift, the paradigm in CSR implementation has also definitively moved from the charity and infrastructure models toward community empowerment. The discourse of empowerment promises a new relationship between companies and communities, where communities are no longer positioned as passive recipients of aid, but rather as active subjects or partners who are sovereign in determining their own development direction. Theoretically, the core of empowerment is participation. Effective communication for development (C4D) is believed to require a shift from a linear model (transmission/persuasion) to a participatory model, which prioritizes dialog, equality, and the co-creation of meaning to achieve sustainable independence.

However, this is where the critical gap lies, which is the main focus of this article: the gap between the rhetoric of participation and the reality of its implementation in the field. Although many CSR programs claim to have adopted a participatory approach, the fundamental question is: what kind of participation is actually taking place? Has that participation reached the level of citizen power, or has it stopped at the level of tokenism? This article argues that in many CSR practices, including programs recognized for their success thru prestigious awards like PROPER Gold Rating, the communication process that occurs often

unconsciously (or even consciously) perpetuates what we identify as pseudo-participation. This pseudo-participation refers to community engagement practices that appear democratic on the surface, but in reality do not give the community true power to influence strategic decision-making.

Using the critical framework of the "Ladder of Citizen Participation" (Arnstein, 1969), this research will dissect communication practices within PT KPI's CSR program across three case study locations: Sungai Pakning (Riau), Plaju (South Sumatra), and Kasim (Southwest Papua). The focus of the analysis is not to negate the positive achievements of these programs, but rather to clearly identify the mechanisms of pseudo-participation operating at the Tokenism level—namely, Informing, Consulting, and Placation. This article will explore how the dominant top-down or asymmetrical communication model has become a key instrument in maintaining corporate control over agenda setting, resource allocation, and—most crucially—the definition of program "success." This finding is the initial finding (problem finding) of a broader dissertation research, with the ultimate goal of formulating an alternative communication model that can overcome this trap of pseudo-participation.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on communication in the context of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and community empowerment is at the intersection of organizational communication theory, development studies, and sociology. To frame the concept of pseudo-participation, relevant theoretical foundations must be drawn from all three disciplines. First, the evolution in the theory of CSR communication provides context on how companies ideally interact with stakeholders. Early theories viewed CSR communication as a strategic action, where communication is persuasive and instrumental, designed to manage corporate image and reputation. This is a one-way or asymmetrical two-way communication model, where the company only listens to stakeholders to find more effective ways to persuade them to accept the company's goals. However, criticism of this approach led to a shift toward Communicative Action, inspired by Habermas. In this model, CSR communication is ideally two-way symmetrical, where the goal is not persuasion, but rather the achievement of mutual understanding through equal, rational, and non-dominant dialogue. True community empowerment is only possible in this symmetrical model.

The second theoretical foundation, and the most

central to this article, is the typology of participation introduced by Sherry Arnstein (1969) through her monumental work, "A Ladder of Citizen Participation." Arnstein brilliantly categorized citizen participation into eight rungs, divided into three main levels that reflect the actual distribution of power. The lowest level is Non-Participation, which consists of the steps Manipulation and Therapy. At this level, the true goal is to "educate" or "cure" participants into accepting the agenda set by those in power, not to empower them. The second level is tokenism, which is the main focus of this analysis. This level consists of Informing, Consulting, and Placation. At the Informing stage, communication is still one-way, where information is provided, but there is no room for feedback. At the Consulting stage, participation begins to open through surveys, community meetings, or Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), but there is no guarantee that community input will be considered. This is a common practice in many CSR programs, where FGDs are held to "validate" programs whose designs have already been prepared by the company. Placation is the highest level of tokenism, where community representatives are allowed to sit on boards or committees, but they do not have significant voting power. They were allowed to "advise," but the power to decide remained in the hands of the company. The highest level is Citizen Power, which includes Partnership, Delegated Power, and Citizen Control, where the community has real power to negotiate, share decisions, and ultimately hold full control over the program.

Based on Arnstein's framework, this article defines pseudo-participation as the practice of engaging the public that only reaches the level of tokenism. In the context of CSR, this is a situation where the company has full control over the planning and evaluation process, while community participation is directed and limited to the implementation phase, such as being volunteer workers, members of implementing farmer groups, or training participants. Communication in pseudo-participation is asymmetrical; it is used to inform about pre-made decisions, consult on pre-designed plans, or placate community representatives to make them feel involved, without ever fundamentally transferring decision-making power. This phenomenon is often reinforced by the cultural context in Indonesia, where a high Power Distance score, as identified by Hofstede, creates a cultural tendency to accept decisions from authority figures (whether they are traditional leaders, government officials, or company managers). Companies,

consciously or unconsciously, can leverage these social structures to achieve consensus more efficiently, effectively bypassing the more complex and time-consuming, yet essential, process of dialogic participation for true empowerment.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

To unravel the complex and often hidden communication mechanisms behind pseudo-participatory practices, this study adopts a qualitative approach with a constructivist-interpretive paradigm. This approach was chosen because the research objective was not to quantitatively measure the level of participation, but rather to deeply understand (interpret) how the processes of communication and social interaction among the actors (companies, facilitators, local elites, and communities) contribute to constructing the reality of "participation" in the field. This paradigm views social reality as something that is negotiated and created thru interaction, so the focus of analysis is on the processes of dialog, power relations, and language use within the specific context of the CSR program.

The research strategy used is an embedded collective case study. The case study approach (Yin, 2009) is relevant because it allows the researcher to investigate contemporary phenomena (empowerment communication) holistically within the context of real life. The collective nature of this design refers to the involvement of three units of analysis or three different cases, namely the CSR programs at PT KPI Sungai Pakning Unit, Plaju Unit, and Kasim Unit. The use of multiple sites allows for cross-case analysis, which can strengthen the external validity of the findings and enable the formulation of "analytical generalizations" rather than statistical generalizations. The embedded nature refers to the fact that these three cases were deliberately selected based on specific criteria: they are all CSR programs recognized as "successful" and consistently achieving PROPER Gold Rating from the Ministry of Environment and Forestry. The selection of these successful cases is crucial for the research argument; by identifying pseudo-participation within programs considered "best practices," this finding becomes more critically significant, demonstrating how pervasive this tokenism practice is, even in the most outstanding CSR implementations.

Data collection was carried out using the principle of method triangulation to ensure the richness and validity of the data. The main technique used is in-depth interviews. Semi-structured interviews were

conducted with a wide range of informants purposively selected across the three locations, including representatives from company management (CSR Managers), field implementers (Community Development Officers/Facilitators), local government representatives (Village Heads/Subdistrict Heads/District Heads), key community figures (Traditional/Religious Leaders, Group Leaders), and community members who are beneficiaries. The second technique is participant observation, where the researcher is directly involved in various program activities such as planning meetings, FGDs, community work, and daily mentoring. This observation is crucial for directly observing the dynamics of unspoken communication, the power relations at play, and the actual decision-making processes, which often differ from what is reported in formal interviews. The third technique is document study (content analysis), which involves analyzing program documents such as social mapping reports, program proposals, PROPER documents, socialization materials, and internal evaluation reports.

The data analysis process uses the interactive analysis model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña. This process is a continuous cycle between data collection, data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing/verification. During the data reduction process, the researcher performs open and focused coding, specifically looking for data related to the communication process at each stage of the program cycle (planning, implementation, evaluation) and categorizing it based on Arnstein's ladder of participation theoretical framework (Non-Participation, Tokenism, Citizen Power). The coded data was then presented in a cross-case matrix to compare communication patterns across the three locations. From this comparison, conclusions were drawn and verified again with field data, which ultimately crystallized into the main finding regarding the dominance of pseudo-participation.

4. RESULT & DISCUSSION

4.1. *Unveiling the Mechanism of Pseudo-Participation in CSR Communication*

An in-depth analysis of empowerment communication practices at three operational units of PT Kilang Pertamina Internasional (KPI) - Sungai Pakning, Plaju, and Kasim - revealed a fundamental and paradoxical finding. Although these three operating units are consistently recognized as national models thru their achievement of the highest rating, PROPER Emas, which explicitly requires community empowerment and social innovation, the

underlying communication practices were found to still operate within a framework of pseudo-participation. This finding does not negate the positive impacts of the program, such as real economic growth or improvements in environmental quality. Conversely, these findings offer a critical analysis of the quality of participation that occurred. Using the theoretical framework of "Citizen Participation Ladder" proposed by Arnstein (1969), this study found that the power relationship between the company and the community is still predominantly at the Tokenism level. The community is involved, but this involvement is not accompanied by a substantial transfer of power to influence strategic decisions. This apparent participation, we found, was not an unintentional failure, but rather a rational and efficient communication strategy for companies to manage social risks, meet regulatory compliance requirements (PROPER), and maintain their Social License to Operate (SLO) without relinquishing control over the agenda, resources, and definition of success. The mechanism for perpetuating this pseudo-participation was systematically identified in three main phases of the program cycle: planning, implementation, and monitoring-evaluation.

Pseudo-participation is most evident during the program planning phase, which is the most crucial point where program power and direction are determined. The findings at all three locations show a consistent pattern: companies have full control over the agenda-setting process, while community participation tends to be "limited participatory." This process typically begins with the company, often thru an external facilitator or consultant, conducting Social Mapping. This mapping, while important, is essentially a technocratic process where companies top-down identify community "problems," "needs," and "potential" based on a logical framework and corporate interests. The program was then designed internally by the CSR team to address the findings of the mapping. Once the program design (including budget and objectives) is prepared, the company will then facilitate public engagement forums, such as Village Consultations or Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). It is at this point that sham participation becomes visibly apparent. The community is not invited to define their problems from scratch or co-create solutions. Instead, they were invited to provide input, validation, or approval for plans already designed by the company. This is a classic practice from the Consulting step in Arnstein's (1969) model. The communication that takes place is two-way and asymmetrical: the company listens, but only

to refine the implementation of its plans or to manage potential resistance, not to change the program's fundamental agenda.

Furthermore, the practice of Layered Communication, identified as a key success factor in locations like Kasim, Southwest Papua, can also be interpreted as a mechanism of Placation that legitimizes pseudo-participation. In Kasim, the company cleverly realized that communication had to go thru Key Figures, namely the Mooi Tribal Chief and the Church Leader, to obtain their "blessing." By focusing intensive negotiations and dialog on these local elites, the company successfully obtained program approval. Although this strategy is highly effective and culturally sensitive—respecting the high Power Distance structure—it simultaneously bypasses broader deliberative processes at the grassroots level. The general public then participated not because they were involved in the planning, but because of "customary orders" or directives from leaders they respected. Within Arnstein's framework, this is a form of Placation: the company grants status and recognition to community elite representatives, giving them a "seat at the table" to be heard, but the final decision-making power remains in the hands of the company that has successfully "persuaded" these elites. Thus, the planning phase concludes with an agenda entirely controlled by the company, which has been wrapped in social legitimacy thru consultation and public announcements.

The paradox of participation then continued into the implementation phase. This is where community participation is most visible, massive, and often celebrated by companies as proof of successful empowerment. Field findings at all three locations confirm the very active community involvement in program implementation. In Kasim, the success of the clean water network development was impossible without the collective effort (mutual cooperation) of the Mooi tribe's indigenous community, who provided the labor for installing the pipes. In the Pakning River, the Kampung Gambut Berdikari program relies entirely on the active participation of the Tunas Makmur Farmers Group in managing pineapple land and the Masyarakat Peduli Api (MPA) in conducting land fire prevention patrols. However, a critical analysis of the quality of this participation shows that it is participation as implementers or labor, not participation as managers or strategic decision-makers. The community was effectively mobilized to carry out the work that had been planned for them in the previous phase. This involvement is highly functional and efficient in achieving project targets. For example, MPA's

involvement in mitigating forest and land fires is directly aligned with PT KPI's vital business interests in securing its refinery from fire threats.

The communication model used by the field facilitator (CDO) during implementation is facilitative communication, which is, once again, asymmetrical. CDO is present in the community, building cultural proximity and serving as a bridge for communication. Their role is crucial in mediating internal group conflicts, such as the leadership dualism found in the Tunas Makmur Farmers Group, or handling technical complaints in the field. However, the main goal of this facilitative communication is to ensure the smooth implementation of the program according to the company's plan. The CDO functions as a social "lubricant" that resolves problems to keep projects moving (a problem solver), not as a facilitator who transfers managerial or financial power to the group. The community is preoccupied with actions (planting, extinguishing fires, building pipes), which gives them the illusion of involvement and empowerment. Meanwhile, control over strategy, budget, and program direction remains firmly in the hands of the company. This is the most effective form of Tokenism (Placation), where the community is given a significant role in "doing" but not in "deciding."

The most conclusive evidence of pseudo-participation was identified during the Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) phase. Research findings indicate that at this stage, community participation was almost completely absent. Unlike the planning process, which at least involves "consultation," or implementation, which involves "collective action," the evaluation phase is almost exclusively conducted internally by the company or by appointing a third party (external consultants or academics). The primary goal of the evaluation is not collective learning with the community, but rather to measure program accountability against external standards—particularly compliance with PROPER criteria—and to calculate the impact of social investment thru methodologies such as Social Return on Investment (SROI). This is a metric defined by the company, for the company's benefit.

This is where the core of pseudo-participation lies: the community is not involved in defining what "success" or "independence" means from their own perspectives, values, and needs. As honestly stated in the dissertation findings, the evaluation tends to be viewed "from the company's perspective, not from the perspective of society." When society is separated from the process of measuring and interpreting the

results of their own hard work, the cycle of empowerment is fundamentally broken. The communication process here has reverted to being one-way. The company collects data, analyzes it, and then might inform (Arnstein's Informing rung) the public of the results in the form of reports or ceremonies. This cycle closes the loop of pseudo-participation: programs are planned by the company, implemented by the community (as labor), and evaluated by the company. Although this model proved highly effective for winning awards and

securing SLOs in the short term, it failed to build a foundation of true independence. It actually risks creating new forms of dependency and sowing the seeds of latent social conflict in the future from frictions and aspirations that are not substantially accommodated.

The following table synthesizes the findings of pseudo-participation in the field (observed in this study at the level of Tokenism) and compares them to ideal participation (the level of Citizen Power) as conceptualized by Arnstein (1969) in Table 1.

Table 1: Comparison Matrix: Tokenism Participation vs. Ideal Participation (Arnstein).

Program Phase	Indicator	Pseudo-Participation (Found in the Field)	Ideal Participation (Citizen Power) according to Arnstein
Planning	Level	Consulting & Placation.	Partnership & Citizen Control.
	Communication Process	The company conducts social mapping from the top down. FGDs and consultations are used to "validate" or "socialize" already existing plans. Negotiations only occur with the elite/key figures.	Society and companies negotiate as equal partners. Communities have the power to formulate problems, define priorities, and design programs from the ground up (co-creation).
	Results	The community provided input, but the company held veto power and full control over setting the agenda and budget.	There is a clear division of responsibility and decision-making power. The budget is negotiated together.
Implementation	Level	Placation.	Delegated Power.
	Communication Process	Facilitative (asymmetric) communication from the CDO. Community participation is mobilized as a workforce or technical implementers (e.g., mutual cooperation, members of farmer groups).	Communication is coordinative. The company delegates managerial authority and financial control to community committees or organizations.
	Results	The physical project was implemented efficiently. The community feels "actively involved" in the activities, but has no managerial or strategic power over the program's direction.	The community has full control over implementation management. The company acts as a technical facilitator or a source of funding overseen by the community.
Monitoring & Evaluation	Level	Consulting or even Non-Participation.	Citizen Control.
	Communication Process	The evaluation is conducted internally by the company or by external consultants. The community is only an object/respondent in the survey.	The community designs and implements the evaluation process (e.g., Participatory M&E). Communication is reporting from the community to other stakeholders (including the company).
	Results	"Success" is defined by external metrics (PROPER, SROI) from the company's perspective. The community was not involved in interpreting the results.	"Success" is defined by the community based on their values and needs. The evaluation results serve as the basis for the community to independently plan the next program cycle.

5. CONCLUSION

This research aims to critically analyze the communication practices behind the successful CSR programs at three operational units of PT Kilang Pertamina Internasional. The main finding identified as the initial finding of the larger dissertation research is the dominance of pseudo-participation.

Despite the rhetoric of empowerment and participation, an in-depth analysis of the three phases of the program cycle—planning, implementation, and evaluation—reveals a more complex reality. It was found that community participation, although very high during the implementation phase as executors, was significantly absent during the strategic planning and evaluation phases. This

community engagement process consistently operates at the level of Tokenism, according to Arnstein's ladder of participation, where the community is given space to be heard thru consultation mechanisms, but is not given the power to participate in decision-making.

Furthermore, this study identifies that this pseudo-participation is perpetuated by a two-way asymmetrical communication model. The company actively opens feedback channels, but uses them instrumentally to manage public perception and adjust persuasion tactics, rather than engaging in an equal dialog to change the program's fundamental goals. In the context of the capital-intensive and high-risk oil and gas industry, this practice can be understood as a rational risk management strategy, where the illusion of participation is created to meet regulatory demands (such as PROPER) and maintain a Social License to Operate (SLO), while strategic control remains strictly maintained by the company.

Theoretically, these findings contribute

empirically to the study of critical CSR communication, demonstrating how the ideals of Communicative Action Theory (Habermas) and the symmetrical communication model are often distorted by the reality of unequal power relations between corporations and communities. Practically, this research serves as a critical reflection for PT KPI and other CSR practitioners. Although these programs were externally successful (achieving PROPER Gold), this practice of pseudo-participation risked failing to achieve the ultimate goal of empowerment, which is community independence. Conversely, it has the potential to create new model dependencies and store latent social friction from groups in society who feel they are not truly heard. This article, by exposing the problem of pseudo-participation, essentially lays the groundwork for an urgent need: the formulation of a new communication model capable of transitioning these tokenistic relationships toward authentic and dialogic partnerships.

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