

Participatory Communication Model for Strengthening Partnership Relations between PT Sukses Mantap Sejahtera and Sugarcane Farmers in Dompu Regency

Muhammad Iqbal *, Hari Akbar Sugiantoro

Communication Science Study Program, Faculty of Economics, Social Sciences, and Humanities, 'Aisyiyah University of Yogyakarta, 55292, Indonesia

*Corresponding author's email: labujambu678@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Keywords

Participatory Communication;
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Agribusiness partnerships between companies and farmers often face communication challenges that may affect the sustainability of the partnership. This study aims to analyze the implementation of participatory communication in the agribusiness partnership between PT Sukses Mantap Sejahtera (PT SMS) and sugarcane farmers in Dompu Regency. This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study method. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, field observations, and document analysis, and analyzed using thematic analysis with source triangulation. The findings show that participatory communication is reflected in two-way dialogue, transparency of information, relatively equal relationships, and farmers' involvement in decision-making related to sugarcane business management. These communication practices help build trust, strengthen coordination, and support the sustainability of the partnership. The study also proposes a participatory communication model emphasizing dialogic interaction and information transparency as the foundation of company-farmer relations.

1. Introduction

Indonesia is widely recognized as an agrarian country with significant potential in the agricultural sector, which plays a crucial role in supporting the national economy. According to the Ministry of Agriculture of the Republic of Indonesia, the agricultural sector recorded the highest growth in the first quarter of 2025 at 10.52%, surpassing other sectors such as trade (5.03%) and manufacturing (4.55%). One of the strategic commodities in this sector is sugarcane, which serves as the primary raw material for the national sugar industry. Data from Statistics Indonesia (BPS, 2024) indicate that national sugar demand continues to increase annually in line with population growth and household consumption, making sugarcane a high-value commodity that contributes to national food security.

One of the sugarcane development areas in Eastern Indonesia is Dompu Regency, West Nusa Tenggara, where PT Sukses Mantap Sejahtera (SMS), part of the SAMORA Group, operates. The company develops sugarcane plantations through partnerships with local farmers, with a total sugarcane cultivation area reaching approximately 4,672 hectares in 2024. Of this, around 1,700 hectares are managed through partnerships involving approximately 1,400 farmers. The presence of PT SMS has not only improved agricultural productivity but also contributed significantly to the economic welfare of local communities.

The partnership between PT SMS and sugarcane farmers is implemented through an Agribusiness Operational Cooperation (KOA) scheme, which regulates the production process up to the marketing of sugarcane products through contractual agreements. This partnership model plays a vital role in maintaining production consistency and increasing farmers' income (Yustianawati et al. 2022). However, in practice, the partnership faces several challenges, particularly in communication. Research by (Nuzlaila, Hakim, and Amalia 2025) indicates that weak internal communication has hindered the effectiveness of partnership relationships between the company and farmers.

Communication problems are further reflected in empirical findings and media reports. Lombok Post (2025, November 24), in an article titled "Solusi Kebuntuan Kawasan Tebu Nasional di Dompu," highlights communication deadlocks and lack of synchronization between the company and farmers, particularly regarding profit-sharing and operational coordination. Additionally, (Putri 2021) found that communication patterns in the partnership tend to be top-down, limiting farmers' participation in decision-making processes. This situation has led to distrust, delayed payments, and uncertainty in contract implementation.

These communication limitations directly affect the sustainability of partnerships and farmers' interest in sugarcane farming. Although sugarcane farming is economically viable with an R/C ratio greater than one (Abdullah, Sarwoprasodjo, and Hapsari 2023), farmers' interest has declined due to price uncertainty and partnership schemes that do not fully accommodate farmers' interests (Ekibis NTB, 2024). Furthermore, the lack of open communication and active farmer involvement often results in misinformation, misunderstandings, and weakened trust in the partnership (Revita Yustianawati et al., 2022).

In this context, participatory communication emerges as a relevant approach to improving partnership relationships. Participatory communication emphasizes two-way dialogue, equality, transparency, and active participation of all stakeholders in decision-making processes (Ikhsan and Sulistiawati 2022; Jaya and Sarwoprasodjo 2024). Previous studies have shown that participatory communication can enhance farmers' capacity, strengthen trust, and support sustainable agribusiness partnerships (Abdullah et al., 2023). However, studies specifically examining the application of participatory communication models in sugarcane partnerships between companies and farmers in Dompu Regency remain limited, as previous research has largely focused on economic and technical aspects (Yunitasari, Khatimah, and Somaji 2020).

Despite the increasing number of studies on agribusiness partnerships, most existing research primarily emphasizes economic outcomes such as productivity, income improvement, and production efficiency, while largely neglecting the role of communication dynamics in shaping partnership relationships. In particular, limited attention has been given to how communication processes influence trust, transparency, and farmers' participation within corporate farmer partnerships. Furthermore, empirical studies that explicitly explain how participatory communication principles operate in practice especially in partnership schemes between agribusiness companies and smallholder farmers remain scarce. This gap is evident in sugarcane agribusiness partnerships in Dompu Regency, where previous studies have predominantly focused on technical and economic aspects, leaving communication processes underexplored. Consequently, there is a lack of comprehensive understanding of how participatory communication can be systematically applied to strengthen partnership sustainability beyond economic considerations.

Therefore, this study aims to formulate a participatory communication model to strengthen the partnership relationship between PT Sukses Mantap Sejahtera and sugarcane farmers in Dompu Regency. Specifically, this research seeks to (1) describe and analyze the existing communication patterns in the partnership, including information flow and interactions between stakeholders, and (2) identify the implementation of participatory communication principles, namely two-way dialogue, equality, transparency, and active participation. This study is expected to contribute academically to the development of communication science, particularly participatory communication in agribusiness, and practically provide recommendations for companies and local governments in building more transparent, equitable, and sustainable partnerships.

2. Method

This study employs a qualitative research approach with a descriptive design to understand participatory communication processes within the partnership between PT Sukses Mantap Sejahtera (SMS) and sugarcane farmers in Dompu Regency. Qualitative research enables the exploration of social phenomena from the perspectives of participants and the interpretation of their experiences within specific contexts (Creswell and Creswell 2024). This approach is appropriate as the study focuses on communication patterns, farmer participation, and social dynamics in agribusiness partnerships. The research was conducted in Doropeti Village, Pekat District, Dompu Regency, West Nusa Tenggara, in February 2026. The research subjects consisted of representatives from PT SMS specifically the Manager and Section Head of the Media & External Relations (MER) Department and partner sugarcane farmers who have direct experience in the partnership.

Data were collected using three primary techniques: structured interviews, participatory observation, and documentation (Creswell & Creswell, 2024). Interviews were conducted with company representatives to obtain information regarding communication policies, information flow, and partnership models, as well as with farmers to explore their experiences related to participation, trust, and transparency. Participatory observation was carried out to directly examine interactions between farmers and the company in real partnership activities, allowing the researcher to capture communication behaviors and social dynamics. Documentation, including media reports, publications, and relevant public records, was used to support and verify data obtained from interviews and observations.

To ensure data validity, this study applied triangulation of sources and methods (Creswell & Creswell, 2024), involving multiple informants and integrating data from interviews, observations, and documentation. Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) as cited in (Pratidina, Haryaka, and Nurlaili 2025), which includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Data reduction involved selecting and organizing relevant information, while data display presented findings in descriptive narratives to identify patterns and relationships. Finally, conclusions were drawn and continuously verified to ensure the credibility and reliability of the findings regarding participatory communication, information transparency, and partnership dynamics in the sugarcane agribusiness context.

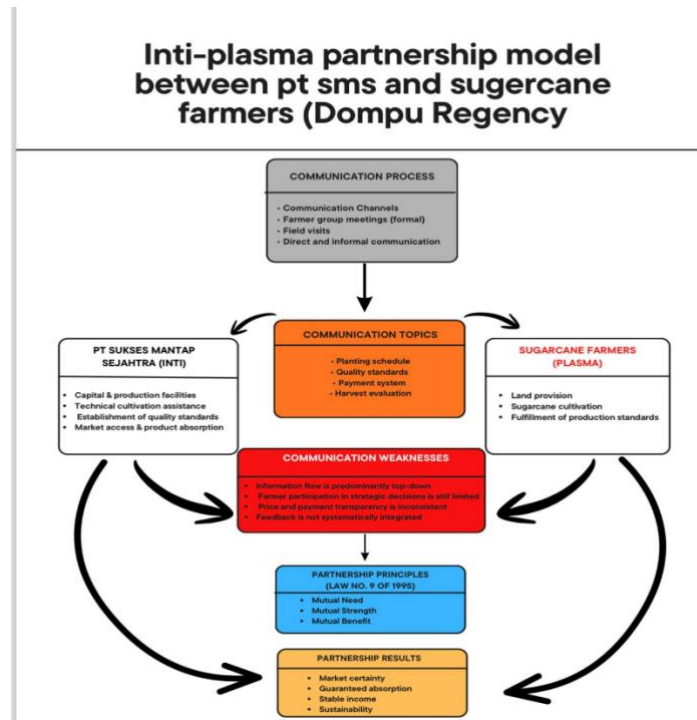
3. Result and Discussion

3.1 Partnership Model between PT SMS and Sugarcane Farmers

The partnership between PT Sukses Mantap Sejahtera (SMS) and sugarcane farmers represents a mutually beneficial agribusiness collaboration based on the principles of mutual need, mutual strengthening, and mutual benefit, as outlined in Law No. 9 of 1995 on Small Enterprises. This partnership also reflects the concept of agribusiness cooperation emphasizing the shared distribution of risks, resources, and benefits between companies and farmers. Based on interview findings, communication within this partnership is conducted through both formal and informal channels. Formal communication occurs through farmer group meetings discussing planting schedules, sugarcane quality standards, payment systems, and harvest evaluations.

According to Informant 1, the partnership model applied by PT SMS follows a nucleus–plasma scheme, where the company acts as the nucleus by providing capital, production inputs, technical assistance, and market access, while farmers act as plasma by supplying land and conducting cultivation activities. This partnership involves approximately 1,400 farmers managing around 1,700 hectares of land, making communication a critical factor in ensuring effective coordination. From the farmers' perspective (Informant 3), the partnership provides tangible benefits, including stable market access, guaranteed crop absorption, competitive pricing, and technical assistance. These findings are consistent with (Komarrudin and others 2024), which states that structured agribusiness

partnerships can improve farmers' welfare when supported by effective and continuous communication. However, the study also highlights that partnership success is not solely determined by economic and technical aspects but is strongly influenced by the quality of communication between stakeholders.



3.2 Communication Practices in the Partnership

The findings indicate that communication practices within the partnership between PT Sukses Mantap Sejahtera and sugarcane farmers are characterized by a dual-channel system, consisting of formal and informal communication mechanisms. These two forms of communication complement each other in facilitating coordination, information exchange, and relationship building between the company and its partner farmers.

Formal communication is primarily conducted through structured farmer group meetings, which serve as official platforms for disseminating information and coordinating operational activities. These meetings typically address key aspects of the partnership, including planting schedules, sugarcane quality standards, harvest planning, payment systems, and post-harvest evaluations. Through these forums, the company communicates technical guidelines and policy updates, while farmers are given opportunities to raise questions and provide feedback. This structured approach ensures that critical information is systematically delivered and documented, thereby reducing ambiguity in operational procedures.

However, while formal communication provides clarity and structure, it is often limited in flexibility and immediacy. As a result, informal communication plays a crucial complementary role in maintaining effective interaction. Informal communication occurs through field visits, direct interpersonal interactions, phone calls, and digital messaging platforms. According to Informant 2, these channels are frequently used to address urgent issues such as irrigation problems, pest infestations, and sudden changes in harvest schedules. The immediacy and accessibility of informal communication enable faster response times and more adaptive problem-solving compared to formal mechanisms.

From the farmers' perspective (Informant 3), informal communication significantly reduces perceived hierarchical distance between the company and farmers. This fosters a sense of closeness

and trust, making farmers more comfortable in expressing concerns, complaints, and suggestions. In this context, communication is not merely transactional but relational, contributing to the development of social capital within the partnership. This aligns with previous findings (Dharmawan et al. 2022), which highlight that the integration of formal and informal communication in agricultural contexts enhances farmer participation and accelerates problem resolution.

Despite these strengths, the effectiveness of communication practices remains uneven. Some farmers reported that information is not always distributed evenly or promptly, particularly when rapid changes occur, such as adjustments in harvest schedules due to technical constraints. This indicates that while communication channels exist, their coordination and consistency require further improvement. Therefore, strengthening the integration between formal and informal communication systems is essential to ensure that all stakeholders receive timely, accurate, and consistent information.

3.3 Implementation of Participatory Communication

The implementation of participatory communication within the partnership reflects a shift from a purely top-down communication model toward a more dialogic and inclusive approach. Participatory communication emphasizes the active involvement of all stakeholders in the communication process, allowing farmers to contribute not only as recipients of information but also as decision-making actors. This approach is consistent with Servaes' participatory communication theory, which conceptualizes communication as a dialogical process that promotes shared understanding and collective decision-making.

In the context of PT SMS, participatory communication is operationalized through several key mechanisms. First, regular farmer group meetings function as participatory forums where farmers are encouraged to express their views, raise concerns, and provide input regarding operational activities. These meetings create opportunities for two-way dialogue, enabling the exchange of knowledge between the company and farmers. Farmers' participation in discussions on planting schedules, production challenges, and harvest outcomes demonstrates their active role in the partnership process.

Second, participatory communication is reinforced through direct field engagement. Field visits conducted by the Media & External Relations (MER) team and section heads allow for real-time interaction between company representatives and farmers. During these visits, technical guidance is provided, and farmers are able to directly communicate challenges they face in the field. This interaction not only facilitates knowledge transfer but also strengthens relational trust, as farmers perceive the company as actively involved and responsive to their needs.

Third, informal communication channels further support participatory engagement by enabling continuous interaction beyond formal settings. Farmers can directly contact company representatives via phone or messaging applications to report urgent issues or seek immediate assistance. As expressed by a farmer (Afly Ramadhan – Field Assistant Mitra Barat), *"If there are issues such as drought or pests, we can directly contact PT SMS staff, and they usually respond quickly."* This illustrates that participatory communication is not limited to scheduled interactions but is embedded in daily communication practices.

The implementation of participatory communication has contributed to several positive outcomes, including increased farmer engagement, stronger trust, and a greater sense of ownership over the partnership program. Farmers are more willing to participate in discussions and are more confident in expressing their perspectives, indicating a shift toward a more inclusive communication environment. However, the study also reveals that participatory communication is not yet fully realized. While farmers are actively involved in operational discussions, their participation in strategic decision-making remains limited, with key decisions still largely dominated by the company.

This partial implementation suggests that participatory communication in the partnership operates at different levels of engagement. At the operational level, participation is relatively strong, as farmers are directly involved in day-to-day activities. In contrast, at the strategic level, participation is more constrained, indicating the need for greater empowerment and inclusion of farmers in higher-level decision-making processes. Strengthening participatory communication at all levels is essential to ensure that the partnership becomes more equitable, transparent, and sustainable in the long term.

3.4 Communication Challenges in the Partnership

Despite the existence of both formal and informal communication mechanisms, the findings reveal that several communication challenges persist within the partnership between PT Sukses Mantap Sejahtera (SMS) and sugarcane farmers. These challenges highlight gaps between the intended participatory communication approach and its practical implementation in the field.

One of the primary issues identified relates to transparency in pricing and payment systems. During the early stages of the partnership, payments were conducted collectively through intermediaries, which led to delays and perceptions of non-transparency among farmers. This situation created uncertainty regarding the actual amount received and weakened trust in the partnership. Although the company has since improved the system by implementing direct payments to individual farmer bank accounts and clarifying contractual agreements, concerns regarding price transparency—particularly related to yield calculations (*rendemen*) and deductions—remain. This indicates that transparency is not only about system improvements but also about ensuring farmers' understanding of technical and financial information.

Another significant challenge involves communication related to harvest scheduling and milling capacity. Farmers reported that delays often occur due to limited milling capacity or technical disruptions at the sugar factory. However, information regarding schedule changes is not always communicated promptly or evenly to all farmers. As a result, some farmers experience uncertainty and operational disruptions, which can negatively affect crop quality and productivity. This issue reflects a lack of synchronization in information dissemination, particularly in situations requiring rapid coordination.

Water availability and irrigation management also present communication challenges. Uneven distribution of irrigation water, combined with delays in communicating water allocation schedules, affects planting decisions and crop growth, especially during the dry season. In such cases, ineffective communication exacerbates existing resource constraints, making it difficult for farmers to plan their cultivation activities efficiently. This demonstrates that communication plays a critical role not only in coordination but also in resource management within agribusiness partnerships.

In addition, the study identifies limitations in farmer participation in strategic decision-making. While farmers are actively involved in operational discussions through meetings and field interactions, their influence on higher-level decisions such as pricing policies, contract adjustments, and production strategies remains limited. This partial participation suggests that the partnership still retains elements of a top-down communication structure, where decision-making authority is concentrated within the company. Consequently, although dialogue exists, it does not always translate into shared decision-making power.

Furthermore, inconsistencies in field visit schedules and complaint-handling mechanisms were also noted. Farmers expressed the need for more regular and proactive engagement from company representatives in gathering and responding to their concerns. In some cases, delays in addressing minor issues allow them to escalate into larger problems, potentially affecting both productivity and trust. This indicates that communication responsiveness and continuity are critical factors in maintaining effective partnerships.

Overall, these challenges demonstrate that the effectiveness of communication within the partnership is not solely determined by the availability of communication channels but also by the quality, timeliness, and inclusiveness of information exchange. While PT SMS has made significant

improvements, particularly in enhancing transparency and establishing two-way communication, further efforts are needed to ensure equitable participation, consistent information flow, and greater responsiveness. Addressing these challenges is essential for strengthening trust, improving coordination, and ensuring the long-term sustainability of the partnership.

3.5 Participatory Communication Analysis

The implementation of participatory communication principles is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Analysis of Participatory Communication Theory and Field Findings

No	Concept	Theoretical Indicator	Field Findings	Alignment Analysis	Partnership Implications
1	Two-way dialogue	Reciprocal information exchange	Meetings, field visits, informal communication active	Partially aligned	Improves coordination but risks miscommunication
2	Equality	Equal opportunity to express opinions	Farmers can speak in meetings, but strategic decisions dominated by company	Partially aligned	Limited empowerment
3	Transparency	Clear information on price, risks, benefits	Contracts and direct payments exist; technical understanding varies	Moderately aligned	Builds trust but needs better education
4	Active participation	Involvement in planning to evaluation	Farmers involved operationally, limited in policy level	Partially aligned	Strengthens ownership but needs expansion

The analysis of agribusiness partnership principles is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Analysis of Agribusiness Partnership Theory and Field Findings

No	Principle	Indicator	Field Findings	Alignment Analysis	Sustainability Impact
1	Transparency & contract clarity (Sirait et al., 2025)	Clear pricing and agreements	MoU and direct payments implemented; technical confusion remains	Partially aligned	Reduces conflict
2	Farmer empowerment	Technical support provided	Active assistance by MER staff	Fully aligned	Improves productivity

3	Sustainability	Long-term mutual benefits	Stable partnership maintained	Aligned	Ensures stability
4	Social (trust)	capital Trust-based relationship	Trust increased after system improvements	Aligned	Strengthens loyalty

The findings indicate that participatory communication plays a strategic role in strengthening agribusiness partnerships between PT SMS and sugarcane farmers. While the principles of two-way dialogue, equality, transparency, and participation have been implemented, they are not yet fully optimized. Challenges remain in information distribution, technical understanding, and farmer involvement in strategic decisions.

From a theoretical perspective, this study confirms that participatory communication serves as a mechanism for strengthening social capital in agribusiness partnerships. Consistent implementation of participatory communication principles enhances trust, coordination, and sustainability. These findings support previous studies emphasizing that effective communication is a key determinant of successful agribusiness partnerships (Dharmawan et al., 2022).

4. Conclusion

This study concludes that communication within the partnership between PT Sukses Mantap Sejahtera and sugarcane farmers in Dompu Regency is facilitated through a combination of formal and informal channels, including farmer group meetings, digital communication, and field visits, which collectively support coordination and information exchange. Two-way dialogue plays a crucial role in enabling operational collaboration and fostering trust among stakeholders; however, the implementation of participatory communication remains partial. Persistent challenges are evident, particularly in achieving consistent information transparency and broadening farmers' involvement in strategic decisionmaking processes. From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the literature on participatory communication by demonstrating that it functions as a relational and social process that strengthens trust and social capital within agribusiness partnerships, while operating at different levels of engagement namely operational and strategic. From a practical standpoint, the findings underscore the importance of developing communication systems that are more transparent, inclusive, and responsive, especially with regard to pricing mechanisms, payment processes, and harvest scheduling, in order to enhance partnership sustainability. Nevertheless, this study is limited by its reliance on a single case study and a qualitative research design, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. Accordingly, future research is encouraged to adopt comparative and mixed-methods approaches across different regions and agricultural commodities, as well as to further examine the role of digital communication technologies in strengthening participatory communication within agribusiness partnership.

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