

Policy Advocacy for The Management of the Sunan Gunung Jati Religious Tourism Area: A Participatory Communication Study in Cirebon

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Abstract

This study investigates policy advocacy for the management of the Sunan Gunung Jati religious tourism area in Cirebon, focusing on the critical role of participatory communication and local actor engagement. Utilizing a descriptive qualitative approach through library research, the study analyzes scholarly literature and policy documents to understand how inclusive communication fosters community co-creation in policy planning, decision-making, and implementation. The findings reveal that participatory communication, rooted in Islamic community development principles, cultivates collective ownership and shared responsibility, essential for sustainable social transformation. The research highlights the indispensable function of diverse local actors—including religious leaders, youth groups, and NGOs—in mediating social dynamics such as conflicts of interest and resistance to change. Effective advocacy in this context demands context-sensitive communication strategies that balance cultural values, community aspirations, and policy objectives. This study concludes that strengthening community social capacity and clearly defining local actors' roles through holistic communication approaches are paramount for achieving efficient, equitable, and sustainable policy outcomes in culturally intricate environments. The insights offer valuable contributions for developing participatory policy advocacy theories and practices in Indonesia, particularly for religious tourism sites.

Keywords : Cirebon, local actors, participatory communication, policy advocacy, religious tourism.

1. Introduction

Religious tourism is a significant sector within Indonesia's tourism industry, recognized as one of the oldest forms of tourism in its history (Wiharjokusumo & Saragih, 2023). The presence of historical sites and tombs of religious figures serves as a unique attraction for both domestic and international tourists (Faridz, 2023). Beyond its economic impact (Gunawan Aji, Frida Karima, Amelia Pramestika, & Laila Safitri, 2023), religious tourism also embodies spiritual and cultural values that enrich the visitor experience (Wiharjokusumo & Saragih, 2023). However, the management of religious tourism areas often encounters various challenges, including unplanned spatial arrangements, inadequate infrastructure, and conflicts of interest among

different stakeholders. Therefore, effective policy advocacy is essential to ensure the sustainable development of religious tourism areas, benefiting all involved parties.

Policy advocacy is a strategic process aimed at influencing the formulation and implementation of public policies (Mukhtar & Lailam, 2022; Rustandi et al., 2025). In the context of managing religious tourism areas, policy advocacy can be instrumental in urging local governments and other stakeholders to take necessary actions to enhance the quality of management. Effective policy advocacy requires a deep understanding of relevant issues, strong networks with decision-makers, and persuasive communication skills. Furthermore, community participation is a crucial factor in the success of policy advocacy (Kambuam, 2024; Mariana, 2017). By involving the community in the decision-making process, the resulting policies will be more responsive to their needs and aspirations.

The Sunan Gunung Jati Religious Tourism Area in Cirebon stands as one of Indonesia's most popular religious tourism destinations (Musrifah, 2018; Salamah, 2022). The tomb of Sunan Gunung Jati, one of the Walisongo figures who spread Islam in Java (Aini, Ribawati, & Nurhasanah, 2023), is a primary attraction for tourists. Annually, thousands of pilgrims visit the area to pray and commemorate Sunan Gunung Jati's contributions. However, with the increasing number of visitors, the area faces various issues such as traffic congestion, accumulated waste, and unregulated street vendors. Additionally, the spatial planning in the area is suboptimal, reducing visitor comfort and safety.

To address these challenges, comprehensive and participatory policy advocacy is imperative. Local governments, religious leaders, community figures, area managers, and local communities must collaborate to formulate and implement appropriate policies. Such policies should encompass various aspects, including spatial planning, waste management, regulation of street vendors, infrastructure improvement, and tourism promotion. Moreover, these policies must also consider the historical, cultural, and spiritual values inherent in the Sunan Gunung Jati religious tourism area.

This study aims to analyze the process of policy advocacy for the management of the Sunan Gunung Jati religious tourism area in Cirebon, with a focus on participatory communication. This research will examine advocacy strategies in religious tourism area management. Additionally, it will analyze the role of local actors and social dynamics in policy implementation. The findings are expected to make a valuable contribution to the development of participatory policy advocacy theory and practice in Indonesia. The research gap underlying this study is the limited specific research examining the process of policy advocacy for the management of religious tourism areas in Indonesia, particularly at the Sunan Gunung Jati tomb, using a participatory communication approach. Most existing research tends to focus

more on the economic or social aspects of religious tourism (Azis, 2023; Fachri, 2018; Gunawan Aji et al., 2023; Salamah, 2022).

2. Research Method

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach through a library research method, focusing on an in-depth analysis of participatory communication practices and policy advocacy strategies in the development of the Sunan Gunung Jati religious tourism area. This method was selected due to its relevance in exploring social phenomena through a critical review of scholarly literature and published policy documents (Creswell, 2018; Snyder, 2019). Secondary data were collected from academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and official documents obtained from international databases (e.g., Scopus, Web of Science, and ProQuest), with inclusion criteria covering publications from the last ten years that are relevant to participatory communication and policy advocacy.

Data were analyzed through the stages of reduction, categorization, and thematic interpretation using the analytical framework of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), with a coding process applied to identify key patterns and themes. Data trustworthiness was ensured through source triangulation, assessment of literature credibility, and peer debriefing to minimize interpretive bias (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This study emphasizes the integration of theoretical perspectives with previous empirical findings to produce a comprehensive synthesis of participatory communication and policy advocacy within the local context of Cirebon.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Participatory Communication in Public Policy Advocacy

Participatory communication has emerged as a central approach in public policy advocacy, particularly in community development initiatives (Baú, 2025). In the context of religious tourism areas, such as the Sunan Gunung Jati site in Cirebon, participatory communication plays a vital role in ensuring that local communities are not merely passive recipients of policy interventions but are actively engaged as co-creators throughout the planning, decision-making, and implementation processes. This inclusive communication model fosters a dialogical space between local residents, regional authorities, and other key stakeholders, thereby cultivating a collective sense of ownership and shared responsibility for the intended outcomes (Yanti & Prastiwi, 2024).

From the perspective of Islamic community development theory, community participation is regarded as a fundamental instrument for achieving sustainable, value-based social transformation. Communication, in this sense, functions as a transformative medium that bridges the interests of the community and policymakers (Machendrawaty & Safei, 2001). Mechanisms such as community

forums, deliberative meetings (*musyawarah*), and digital platforms have proven to be effective channels for expressing aspirations, voicing criticisms, and proposing solutions related to the management of religious tourism zones.

Importantly, participatory communication extends beyond one-way dissemination of information; it emphasizes reciprocal engagement, empathy, and multi-sectoral collaboration. Findings by Amrulloh highlight the critical role of community leaders and civil society organizations as mediators in facilitating dialogue between local residents and government actors during policy advocacy efforts (Amrulloh, 2022). Therefore, the effectiveness of advocacy initiatives in historically and religiously significant regions, such as Cirebon, is highly contingent upon the implementation of context-sensitive communication strategies that balance cultural values, community aspirations, and policy objectives.

3.2 Policy Advocacy Strategies in the Development of Religious Tourism Areas

Policy advocacy in the context of religious tourism area management requires active community involvement in decision-making processes to ensure that policies are socially inclusive and responsive (Suganda, Nugraha, Gunawan, & Pribadi, 2024). An effective advocacy strategy encompasses three critical dimensions: (1) raising public awareness of rights and responsibilities, (2) enhancing the organizational capacity of local communities, and (3) facilitating structured mechanisms for articulating collective interests. Within the Sunan Gunung Jati religious tourism area, major challenges include the disorganized presence of street vendors, inadequate public spaces, and weak enforcement of tourism zoning regulations, all of which hinder sustainable and culturally respectful area development.

Advocacy strategies have been implemented through dialogical and community empowerment approaches. As highlighted by Arifin & Rofiq (2022), inclusive community engagement in managing local resources significantly enhances the effectiveness of advocacy efforts. Their findings demonstrate that community participation in drafting village regulations (*peraturan desa*) contributes to more responsive and context-specific policymaking. This participatory model is particularly relevant for the Sunan Gunung Jati tourism area, where the active involvement of religious leaders, foundation managers, local traders, and village authorities can create a more equitable and collaborative policy framework.

Furthermore, advocacy experiences from other regions—such as the case of *Waterfront City* led by coastal women's networks (Puspitasari, 2010)—emphasize the importance of stakeholder coalitions and inter-community networking in accelerating policy outcomes. Adopting similar approaches could strengthen the bargaining position of local communities in Cirebon's tourism governance. The integration of modern advocacy tools, including community bulletins, documentary videos, and online petitions, has proven increasingly effective in the digital era,

enabling local voices to influence policy discourses at both the local and regional levels. This convergence of traditional participatory strategies with digital advocacy mechanisms provides a multidimensional approach to achieving sustainable and culturally sensitive tourism management.

3.3 The Role of Local Actors and Social Dynamics in Policy Implementation

The successful advocacy of public policy hinges not only on effective communication strategies but also, critically, on the active involvement of local actors (Gen & Wright, 2018; Rasmussen, Mäder, & Reher, 2018). In the context of the Sunan Gunung Jati religious tourism area, key local stakeholders such as religious leaders, youth groups, local NGOs, and village governments play an instrumental role in mobilizing the community and influencing regional policies. This dynamic is evident in the mediation efforts of religious figures who successfully diffused tensions between street vendors and government officials regarding the arrangement of the tomb area. This highlights the indispensable function of local actors in facilitating policy implementation on the ground.

These findings resonate with previous research emphasizing the pivotal role of local actors in policy implementation (Rosdiana & Noviana, 2021). Ariaoktafiani (2024), for instance, underscore their significance as intermediaries between government and citizens during negotiations of interests and policy oversight in urban slum revitalization programs. Similarly, Christens, Gupta, & Speer (2021) and Rizkiyah, Raharjo, Rudi, & Darwis (2019) highlights the importance of fostering community organizing systems based on local potential and participatory values. Such systems are crucial for strengthening the community's bargaining power in policy advocacy and enhancing collective self-confidence to engage in development initiatives.

However, the implementation process in Cirebon is not without its complexities. If not done carefully, recurring social dynamics such as conflicts of interest among various groups, resistance to change, and social jealousy can occur. These factors necessitate the presence of neutral facilitators capable of maintaining open and constructive communication channels (Wróbel, Lomberg, & Cash, 2021). Without such mediation, these inherent social complexities can impede effective policy implementation.

Therefore, by strengthening the social capacity of the community and clearly defining the roles of local actors, the implementation of policies for the Sunan Gunung Jati religious tourism area can proceed more efficiently, equitably, and sustainably. This holistic approach, integrating both strategic communication and robust local participation, is paramount for achieving desired policy outcomes in culturally sensitive and socially intricate environments.

4. Conclusion

This study underscores that effective policy advocacy for the Sunan Gunung Jati religious tourism area is intrinsically linked to participatory communication and the active engagement of diverse local actors. The findings demonstrate that fostering a dialogical space through mechanisms such as community forums and deliberative meetings (*musyawarah*) enables local communities to transcend their role as passive recipients, becoming co-creators in policy planning, decision-making, and implementation. This inclusive approach, rooted in Islamic community development principles, cultivates a collective sense of ownership and shared responsibility, proving critical for achieving sustainable and value-based social transformation. Despite recurring social complexities like conflicts of interest and resistance to change, the strategic integration of context-sensitive communication and the clear delineation of local actors' roles—including religious leaders, youth groups, and NGOs—are paramount for navigating these dynamics and ensuring equitable and sustainable policy outcomes.

Given these insights, it is recommended that future policy advocacy initiatives prioritize the institutionalization of participatory communication mechanisms to ensure continuous and reciprocal engagement between all stakeholders. Furthermore, capacity-building programs should be developed to empower local communities and actors, strengthening their organizational capabilities and negotiation skills in policy dialogues. The establishment of neutral facilitation bodies is also crucial to mediate social dynamics and maintain constructive communication channels during policy implementation. By adopting a holistic approach that leverages both traditional participatory strategies and modern digital advocacy tools, Cirebon can achieve more responsive, inclusive, and sustainable management of its religious tourism assets, setting a precedent for similar culturally and historically significant sites.

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