

INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION IN PUBLIC FORUMS FOR SUSTAINABLE URBAN GOVERNANCE

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Abstract

The challenges of sustaining the quality of life in the city now demand the approach of governance which including citizens in the process of public decision making. Although Palembang City, Indonesia, has been developing the infrastructure and the urban management program, condition of flooding and traffic jam has become a chronic problem. This research explores based on the Aspiration Festival of the Public Aspiration Agency (Badan Aspirasi Masyarakat/BAM) of the House of Representatives of the Republic of Indonesia the role played by the agency in the communication for urban sustainability of governance through public participation. This qualitative case study investigates deliberative processes among participating city, county, and state officials; scholars; community leaders; and citizens. The data included event documentation, government documents, media articles, policy declarations and relevant scientific literature, which were analysed applying thematic analyse. Drawing on DeVito's Interpersonal Communication Theory, Habermas' Theory of Communicative Action and Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation, the research determines openness, empathy, supportiveness, positiveness, and equality as the five major components of interpersonal communication and the factors that contribute to building public trust and consensus in problem solving. Results show that citizens' concerns can be articulated through an effective interpersonal communication, which can enrich the deliberation and impact on urban policy making. In addition, research findings illustrate that communication is increasingly urban social infrastructure alongside built infrastructure in confronting severe urban problems. In line with these findings the study presents Communicative Sustainable Urban Governance Model (CSUGM) as an integrative model that binds together components such as interpersonal communication, public deliberation, active citizen participation and collaborative governance as a model for sustainable urban development. The research adds to the expanding debates on participatory governance by highlighting communication as a strategic tool to pursue resilient, inclusive and sustainable urban environments.

Keywords: citizen participation; collaborative governance; communication; flooding mitigation; Palembang; sustainable urban governance; traffic congestion.

INTRODUCTION

Urbanization is now one of the most influential processes that has reshaped today's societies. As cities grow due to increases in population, the economy, and technology, urban areas serve more and more as hubs of innovation, business, education, and governance. United Nations: Currently more than half the world lives in urban areas and this number is predicted to rise to nearly 68 percent by 2050. Although urbanization accounts for a significant proportion of economic growth and social evolution, it also poses environmental sustainability, social integration and urban resilience challenges.

Rapidly expanding cities are increasingly plagued by flooding, traffic jams, pollution, crumbling infrastructure, and an uneven distribution of public services. These problems are most acute in the developing world, where urban growth frequently outpaces governments' ability to supply adequate infrastructure and public services. As a result, urban governance has become a key concern for policymakers, scholars and development professionals. The traditional model of governance, in which decisions are made centrally and implemented downwards, seems increasingly ill-suited to address the diverse problems that characterize today's cities. Rather, scholars and practitioners argue for participatory and collaborative governance approaches that engage citizens, civil society organizations, academic institutions, and the private sector as actors in the development and implementation of policies.

The idea of sustainable urban governance has recently emerged as a new conceptualization of urban management. Sustainable urban governance involves decision-making at this fine scale of city governance, yet encompasses processes and structures that provide economic, environmental and social benefits with long-term urban resilience for all city residents. The approaches herein espouses multi-stakeholder cooperation, and the role of citizens not only in problem definition but also in solution development and policy implementation monitoring. In this sense, sustainable urban development is likened not only to a technical activity on the basis of building infrastructure but also to a social and communicative activity involving mutual understanding between governments and citizens.

The resident population keeps increasing along with the urban sprawl in Palembang as reported by BPS Palembang City (2025), halting the strain on city's infrastructure and services. Indonesia is a significant case for investigating sustainable urban governance issues. As one of the world's largest developing countries, Indonesia has been undergoing rapid urbanization in the past few decades. The growth of the population and transformation of the economy has engendered urban expansion in the major cities, providing avenues for development, but also complicated governance hurdles.

Environmental sustainability, transportation management, housing supply, and public service provision are now pressing problems confronting many metropolitan regions. As a

result, the cities of Indonesia need a new form of governance that can accommodate the longings of their communities and translate them into plans and policies for the urban future. Palembang, the capital city of South Sumatra Province, is a very significant case to study in terms of the interrelation of citizen participation with urban governance in sustainable ways. As one of Indonesia's oldest cities and the primary economic center in the southern part of Sumatra, Palembang has experienced dramatic demographic and economic growth in the last 10 years.

Several sections of the city have been reshaped by major infrastructure projects transportation improvements, and urban renewal efforts. Yet the city faces serious urban flooding and traffic problems. Floods continue to pose as a threat to many districts in Palembang. There are multiple reasons for the flooding, which has been exacerbated by land use changes, poor drainage systems, siltation of waterways, diminished green spaces and increased climate variability. So when the rain falls hard and fast, water disruption occurs to transportation system, economy, education, and social society in most areas when water is piled up. Flood's social and economic effects necessitate a broad approach to mitigation that includes but is not limited to engineering solutions.

Traffic congestion is another significant urban problem in Palembang. The existing transport system is under intense pressure due to the explosive motorization, population growth, and booming economic activities. the growth of private vehicles continues to outpace road capacity leading to congestion on major junctions and business corridors. Traffic jams reduce productivity, increase fuel consumption and air pollution, and diminish quality of life. Despite measures taken by the government (such as expanding roads, developing public transportation, and improving traffic management), traffic congestion is still a hot-button issue for citizens.

The persistence of flooding and traffic congestion, even after significant infrastructure investments, indicates that urban problems are not simply a matter of applying technical solutions. Challenges to urban sustainability are by definition multi-dimensional and require governance strategies that can incorporate local knowledge, community experiences, and citizen hopes and dreams into policy processes. Because they live the problems, residents have keen understandings of what causes urban issues, what the problems cost and how they can be addressed. Hence, in order to have a good urban politics, is needed a mechanism able to link policymakers and citizens.

Citizen participation is now widely considered to be an essential part of democratic governance and the promotion of sustainable development. Participation enables citizens to raise concerns, share local knowledge, offer ideas, and influence public decisions in their localities. Participatory governance contributes to increased transparency, accountability and policy legitimacy as well as better public trust in the government institutions. In addition, since participation can enhance the quality of decision-making by better reflecting the actual needs

and priorities of the community, it may also lead to better policies.

The relevance of participation is sustained by various internationally agreed instruments such as the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) of the Goals 11, in making cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable. Delivering this results mandates setting up governance that embraces three levels of citizen involvement in planning, execution and review activities. Yet, effective participation is not feasible without being accompanied with means of communication through which dialogue, understanding and cooperation to resolve joint problems can take place among the parties involved.

Communication is vital for governance since it is the channel for information, ideas, aspirations, and decisions to be communicated. In this sense, communication enables exchanges between governments and citizens in participatory governance, through which public issues are expressed and collective problem solutions are negotiated. Of the many forms of communication, none require more direct engagement or build more trust, empathy, and mutual understanding than interpersonal communication.

DeVito (2022) effective interpersonal communication contains five essential components: openness, empathy, supportiveness, positiveness, and equality. Openness is the separate and connected “other” of *honnêteté* (honesty) and plain-feeling (the extent to which one has a right to share one’s private feelings). Empathy is the recognition and appreciation of the perspectives of others. Supportiveness tends to make people feel at ease to say what is on their mind even if the facilitator might disagree with them. Positiveness promotes a positive dynamic of the debate and mutual appreciation, and equality grants all the participants the status of a positive contribution bearer to the debate, regardless of their social or institutional position.

Such dimensions are indeed germane especially in the context of participatory governance where stakeholders with varying interests are faced with the challenge of working together for unraveling public problems. The importance of communication in democratic governance can be also elucidated by Habermas’ Theory of Communicative Action. Habermas claims that democratic societies are reliant upon citizens with the capacity to reason collectively in pursuit not only of mutual understanding but also of a collective ‘we’ which is communicated through rational dialogue. Courtesy of deliberative communication, citizens and politicians can argue, compare options and work together towards solutions to common problems.

The idea of a public sphere is very much about having spaces to talk where citizens can engage in conversations that impact public policy and governance outcomes. Citizen participation relates to Arnstein’s Ladder of Citizen Participation, an extremely popular model describing levels of public engagement in governance. He sees participation as proceeding along a continuum from non participation at the one end to citizen control at the other. The consequences of higher degrees of participation are increased opportunities for citizens to

influence the content and effects of policies. Modern governance schemes attempt, more and more, to transcend symbolic consultation and to truly engage citizens in contribution to policy formulation and policy enactment.

In this regard, the Aspiration Festival held by the Public Aspiration Agency (Badan Aspirasi Masyarakat/BAM) of the House of Representatives of the Republic of Indonesia on June 14, 2026 stands as a manifestation of participatory governance. The conference convened legislators, government officials, scholars, experts, community leaders and citizens to brainstorm on solutions to flooding and traffic gridlocks in Palembang. The festival served as a forum for public debate, allowing individuals to share viewpoints, raise concerns, and collaboratively develop recommendations for policy.

Although participatory governance and sustainable urban development have attracted increasing attention among scholars, there exists a paucity of research on interpersonal communication as a channel through which citizen participation is connected to urban policy making. Existing research focuses predominantly on the technical matters of flood control, traffic management, infrastructure construction, and environmental design. Thus, there is still lack of knowledge on how communication can be instrumental to shape citizen involvement and sustainable governance outcomes.

The present research aims to close this gap by discussing interpersonal communication as means to enhance public participation and supports sustainable urban governance within the framework of the BAM DPR RI Aspiration Festival. It examines the extent to which communication exchanges between citizens and policy makers increase trust, deliberation, collaboration and responsivity to citizens' preferences on the issues of urban flooding and traffic congestion in Palembang. Using insights from person-centered communication theory, communicative action theory, and citizen participation theory, the study seeks to further develop the study of communication as a strategic tool in sustainable urban governance.

The result is assumed useful both in theoretical and practical manner. In terms of theory, the study broadens current literature by acknowledging the role of interpersonal communication in the participatory governance and urban sustainability. In this regard, the study offers some practical guidance for policy makers and local authorities, as well as civil society organisations, which are interested in developing mechanisms of citizen engagement and in promoting more inclusive urban governance. The study contends that sustainable urban development depends not only on physical infrastructure and technological innovation, but also on communicative infrastructures that link Public Aspiration Forums to policymaking processes and that enable collective action to address complex urban problems.

METHODS

This paper applies qualitative methods, specifically a case study, to explore the significance of interpersonal communication for building public participation and sustainable

urban governance. A qualitative approach is appropriate as the study aims to analyse the social interactions, communication processes, meanings and experiences that both open and constrained public governance in a particular environment. As the complexity of social phenomena increase, qualitative inquiry is an appropriate approach to study participants' beliefs and experiences within the context of the natural setting (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

The case study methodology was chosen because it provides the means to study a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life situation. According to Yin (2018), when an investigator wants to understand “how” and “why” questions of social phenomena, a case study is the preferred research strategy. This study, therefore, through the case study of the Aspiration Festival conducted by the Public Aspiration Agency (Badan Aspirasi Masyarakat/BAM) of the House of Representatives of the Republic of Indonesia (DPR RI), at Palembang, South Sumatera, on June 14, 2026. It was chosen as an event since it was a deliberative venue for citizen, policy makers, scholars, government officials, and community leaders to engage one another on the issues of urban flooding and traffic congestion.

Some 300 people from community groups, academics, government officials, legislators, civil society organisations and other stakeholders passed through the BAM DPR RI Aspiration Festival. This enabled the study to draw from different perspectives on urban flooding, traffic congestion, and sustainable urban governance. The study is conducted within the interpretive paradigm, which presupposes that social reality is the product of human interaction and communication. As a result, the study is an inquiry into how participants engage in communication, make sense of meanings, have hopes and dreams, and partake in policy debates in the sustainable urban development arena.

This paper presents a qualitative document-based case study analysis. The primary data was the official documentation of the BAM DPR RI Aspiration Festival in Palembang attended by some 300 participants composed of members of the community, academics, government, legislators, and other stakeholders. Analyses Drawing on discussion transcripts, official statements by key speakers, event reports, media coverage and related literature. Thematic analysis was used to analyse recurring patterns of communication, concerns of citizens and themes related to governance, as they materialised through the deliberative process.

The unit of analysis is the communication interaction at the BAM DPR RI Aspiration Festival that involves people such as citizens, policymakers, academics, government officials, and community leaders. The analysis addresses communication patterns, processes of participation, deliberation, and instruments for collaborative governance as they are developed in the forum. The festival was a public hearing for gathering community aspirations and for bottom-up dialogue among citizens and policy makers on key urban challenges. Palembang city was chosen as the research site because of its status as a fast growing city that experiences regular flooding and traffic jams despite massive infrastructure investments.

Monitoring data were collected by means of document analysis and literature review. Document analysis was used to review the official documents, policy statements, reports, event materials and media coverage of the Aspiration Festival. Bowen (2009) states that doco analysis is a systematic approach to working with documents in which they are reviewed and evaluated. An extensive review of literature was carried out in order to lay the theoretical groundwork for the study.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, based on the approach described by Braun and Clarke (2022). The analysis was conducted in six phases: (1) Familiarization with Data, (2) Generating Initial Codes, (3) Searching for Themes, (4) Reviewing Themes, (5) Defining and Naming Themes, (6) Producing the Report. Multiple validation techniques were applied throughout the study to ensure the trustworthiness, reliability and validity of findings. Triangulation of data and sources, member checking, and an audit trail were utilized.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The results from the analysis of Thematic data in BAM DPR RI Aspiration Festival may suggested that the Column of interpersonal communication was instrumental in the pace maker propagating its advice in public participation and urban sustainability. The result shows us that communication processes not only make it possible to share information between citizens and government agencies, but are also able to build trust, cooperation, and collective problem solving in the context of discussing floods and traffic jams in the city of Palembang.

Five core themes were identified: (1) transparency as the basis for public trust, (2) compassion and policy responsiveness, (3) public participation as social capital, (4) deliberative communication and collaborative governance, and (5) communication as the PMO social infrastructure in promoting long-term urban sustainability.

Table 1. Coding Framework

Initial Codes	Categories	Themes
Transparency, Information Sharing	Communication Quality	Openness
Listening, Citizen Experiences	Understanding	Empathy
Public Inputs, Community Ideas	Participation	Social Capital
Dialogue, Consensus Building	Deliberation	Collaborative Governance
Networking, Stakeholder Cooperation	Connectivity	Communication Infrastructure

Source: Research Findings (2026)

Theme 1: Openness as a Foundation of Public Trust. One of the major conclusions of the research is the importance of openness in building public trust. During the Aspiration Festival,

attendees had countless opportunities to voice their concerns to legislators, city and county officials, professors and other stakeholders. The day-long event featured frank discussions on the causes, effects and potential solutions to urban flooding and vehicle traffic jams.

Theme 2: Empathy and Policy Responsiveness. The second major theme is that empathy encourages greater responsiveness to policy. The results show that both policymakers and citizens affected by flooding and traffic congestion were able to better understand the daily lives of one another through direct interpersonal exchanges. Empathetic communication enables policy makers to better grasp the social context of urban issues and respond with more appropriate solutions.

Theme 3: Public Participation as Social Capital. A third strand that is picked out in the analysis is that of participation as social capital among the public. A number of citizens had deep knowledge of the local environmental and transportation conditions. Contributors suggested various improvements to alleviate landwater and traffic congestion. Participation gave individuals a chance to sway the debate and to offer solutions.

Theme 4: Deliberative Communication and Collaborative Governance. Under the fourth theme, deliberative communication as a tool for collaborative governance is highlighted. The Aspiration Festival served as a deliberative talk shop, enabling participants to brainstorm solutions to urban problems and policy measures. In contrast to more one-sided communication models, deliberative processes stress dialogue and mutual learning.

Theme 5: Communication as Social Infrastructure for Sustainable Urban Development. The final layer shaping respondents' communication lies in the belief that communicating is a form of social infrastructure. It appears that communication infrastructure is even more significant than water and transport infrastructure. The Aspiration Festival illustrated how a communication process links stakeholders and creates connections through which we can exchange information, ideas, and resources that facilitate collective action.

Table 2. Summary of Research Findings

Theme	Description	Evidence from the Aspiration Festival	Contribution to Sustainable Urban Governance
Openness as a Foundation of Public Trust	Transparent communication between citizens and policymakers facilitates information exchange and strengthens public trust.	Citizens openly expressed concerns regarding flooding, drainage systems, transportation infrastructure, and traffic congestion. Policymakers provided explanations regarding existing policies and development programs.	Enhances transparency, accountability, and trust in governance institutions.
Empathy and Policy	Direct communication enables policymakers to understand citizens'	Residents shared personal experiences related to economic losses, mobility disruptions, and	Improves policy responsiveness and encourages citizen-

Responsiveness	experiences and concerns more deeply.	environmental impacts caused by flooding and traffic congestion.	centered decision-making.
Public Participation as Social Capital	Citizens actively contribute knowledge, ideas, and recommendations beyond merely expressing complaints.	Participants proposed solutions such as drainage revitalization, river normalization, green infrastructure, retention ponds, public transportation expansion, and transit-oriented development.	Strengthens social capital, civic engagement, and collaborative problem-solving capacity.
Deliberative Communication and Collaborative Governance	Communication forums create opportunities for dialogue, consensus-building, and collective decision-making.	Multiple stakeholders, including legislators, government officials, academics, experts, and citizens, engaged in policy discussions and solution development.	Supports collaborative governance and inclusive policymaking processes.
Communication as Social Infrastructure	Communication functions as an enabling infrastructure that connects stakeholders and facilitates collective action.	The Aspiration Festival served as a platform for exchanging information, building networks, and coordinating policy ideas.	Enhances resilience, social integration, adaptive governance, and sustainable urban development.

Source: Research Findings (2026)

Table 3. Relationship Between Findings and Theoretical Frameworks

Research Findings	DeVito's Interpersonal Communication Theory	Habermas' Communicative Action Theory
Openness	Reflects openness as a key dimension of effective communication.	Facilitates transparent deliberation.
Empathy	Demonstrates empathy in understanding others' perspectives.	Supports mutual understanding and communicative rationality.
Public Participation	Represents supportiveness and equality in communication.	Encourages democratic dialogue.
Deliberative Communication	Integrates all communication dimensions.	Embodies deliberative democracy and public sphere principles.
Communication as Social Infrastructure	Extends interpersonal communication beyond individual interaction.	Supports collaborative governance through communicative processes.

Source: Research Findings (2026)

Table 4. Communicative Sustainable Urban Governance Model (CSUGM)

Stage	Key Components	Expected Outcomes
1	Citizen Concerns (Flooding and Traffic Congestion)	Identification of urban challenges and community needs
2	Interpersonal Communication (Openness, Empathy, Supportiveness, Positiveness, Equality)	Improved trust and understanding among stakeholders
3	Public Deliberation	Exchange of knowledge, perspectives, and policy alternatives
4	Citizen Participation	Increased public engagement and collaborative problem-solving
5	Collaborative Governance	Joint decision-making among government, citizens, and stakeholders
6	Policy Formulation and Implementation	Responsive and inclusive urban policies
7	Sustainable Urban Outcomes	Resilient, inclusive, and sustainable urban development

Source: Research Findings (2026)

Analysis/Discussion

The innovation of this study is the construction of a model of Communicative Sustainable Urban Governance Model (CSUGM). Although prior research has analyzed interpersonal communication, citizen engagement, and sustainable urban governance individually, there has been little attempt to merge the views in a comprehensive model. Here, interpersonal communication is about social infrastructure that bridges citizen participation, deliberative communication, collaborative governance, and sustainable urban results.

This study shows that interpersonal communication is essential in promoting public participation and in enhancing sustainable urban governance. The results show communication is not only a platform on which to exchange information but a tactic to link citizen's wishes, deliberative procedures, collaborative governance and policy production. The discussion integrates the empirical data with three central theoretical frameworks, DeVito's Interpersonal Communication Theory, Habermas' Theory of Communicative Action and Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation.

The results lend strong support to DeVito's (2022) assertion that competent relational communication is defined by the relational constructs of openness, empathy, supportiveness, positiveness, and equality. The five dimensions consistently surfaced throughout the Aspiration Festival and enhanced the citizen-policymaker interaction quality. Openness broke down communication barriers and allowed for an honest give-and-take of information between the officials and the citizens.

In Habermas' (1984) view, communicative rationality is the underpinning of democratic

processes in so that people within democratic cultures pursue rational discussion as a means to fostering mutual understanding and agreement. The Aspiration Festival served as a site of deliberative public engagement in which diverse participants debated issues of urban flooding and traffic congestion. The debates included argumentation, reflection and joint consideration of alternative policy options. These interactions are closely aligned with Habermas' ideal of deliberative democracy.

The results can also be analyzed in terms of Arnstein's (1969) Ladder of Citizen Participation, which theorizes participation along a continuum from non-participation to citizen control. Arnstein claims that participation is only meaningful if citizens hold real power over decision-makers. Aspiration Festival fits with yet surpasses that level of participation in which you find it exchanging information or consulting. Citizens actively made recommendations and solutions and engaged in talks on strategies for urban management.

Among the important theoretical contributions of this study is the understanding of communication as social infrastructure. Traditional urban governance studies are concerned with physical infrastructures such as roads, drainage systems, transportation networks and public amenities. But while these are still important, the results indicate that communication infrastructure is just as crucial in bringing about sustainable urban development. Communication infrastructure involves the institutional mechanisms that allow for dialogue, participation, information flow, and collaborative decision making between different stakeholders.

CONCLUSION

This research analyzes the importance of interpersonal communication as a mediator for enhancing public participation and the support for sustainable urban governance in the context of the Aspiration Festival hosted by Badan Aspirasi Masyarakat (House of Representatives of the Republic Indonesia) in Palembang. It shows that interpersonal communication serves as a key mechanism that connects citizen aspirations towards local governance processes, leading to more inclusive, responsive and sustainable urban development.

The analysis revealed five key aspects of interpersonal communication which have a positive influence on governance outcomes: openness, empathy, supportiveness, positiveness, and equality. These factors promote open communication, share mutual understanding, build public trust, and facilitate citizen participation to solve urban problems. It is when citizens communicate directly with policy makers that their concerns are heard and their communities described, they begin to work together on solutions to flooding and traffic congestion.

The results showed further that citizen participation was more than just complaining and demanding. Citizens actively add knowledge, experiences and policy proposals that

deepen the debate in public deliberation and the decision-making. In this sense participation is a type of social capital that facilitates collective action and effective governance. Utilizing these results, the paper advances the Communicative Sustainable Urban Governance Model (CSUGM), which unites interpersonal communication, public deliberation, citizen participation, collaborative governance, and policy development in a holistic model sustainable urban development.

In terms of theory, this study advances the fields of interpersonal communication, participatory governance, and sustainable urban development by explaining how communication can be utilized as a governance tool to increase democratic legitimacy and policy efficiency. From a practical perspective, the findings offer a burgeoning avenue of insight for governments, policymakers, and civil society actors aiming to cultivate greater citizen participation and improved governance. Future studies could adopt mixed-methods designs and comparative analysis between different cities. With cities under pressure to deal with more complex ecological, social, and developmental issues, Communication must be established as a basic element for sustainable governance and urban resilience.

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