

# Religious Leaders and Social Sustainability in Rural Communities in Indonesia

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**ABSTRACT:** *In rural community development, social sustainability becomes an important factor besides economic and environmental sustainability. This study aims to examine how the role of religious leaders in rural areas in maintaining social sustainability. This study was conducted in rural areas in Central Java, Indonesia with a participatory observation approach. The results of this study indicate that the religious leaders become an agent in maintaining social sustainability. The communication skills of religious leaders and leadership types play a role in maintaining social systems and are able to create public space in rural community development activities.*

**KEYWORDS** -Social sustainability, rural development, religious leader

## I. Introduction

Various development efforts have been carried out in rural areas. The village fund program is still the focus of the Government for development in self-help villages. Development in the villages is more widely used as development in physical aspects such as the construction of highways, irrigation channels, lighting and sports facilities. Efforts to develop human resources have also begun, however the results are still not significant. Various activities that have been carried out still seem to be merely running programs so that there is no program sustainability.

The lack of success of the development programs in the village is also inseparable from the dynamics that occur in the midst of the community. Various perceptions that appear can complicate each development agenda. There are differences in perceptions and prejudices from conflicts between citizens and also with the village government. Although what happens is not physical conflict, however, this can complicate any existing development agenda. Community members are quite critical of fellow citizens and also the village government. The development agenda also cannot be separated from people's comments. Some agreed and many feel the program is inappropriate. Many residents also talk about the development in the village.

The approach taken by many parties in community development seems to be a one-direction. Many people do not know what agenda is being carried out in the village, and they are rarely involved in any implementation of development meetings in the village [1]. In addition, there are neither many stakeholders in the village who take part in the planning and handling activities, nor stakeholders who can be invited to work together for developments in the village. One of the stakeholders who can act as a catalyst and dynamist is the religious leader, the "kiai". *Kiai* are religious leaders in the village who have strong Islamic knowledge and capable of being a leader in society [2]. Indirectly, a *kiai* knows how interactions occur in the community and how effective communication needs to be done in managing the community.

In Indonesia, there are religious leaders in almost every village. They have a very important role in leading the community and maintaining social relations in the midst of society. Therefore, the study of the role

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of religion in producing sustainability in the context of community development needs to be done. This requires multi-disciplinary learning to enable it explains in various points of view. In this paper researcher will discuss how changes occur between the community and leaders, the leadership of religious leaders, and social capital and social sustainability.

## II. Method

This study is a qualitative approach. Participatory observation is used in this research. This field research is a research where researchers observed and engaged in every activity in the field [3]. Research location was in Wonosobo Regency, Central Java, Indonesia in 2019. The interview data investigation technique used the snowball sampling method [3]. Observation is carried out by means of every activity of relations, community activities and village development, and interview with key figures such as religious leaders and community leaders. Data analysis was done by taking primary data and secondary data, namely library research. After the data was grouped, then start writing and explain the data obtained.

## III. Results

Interaction is the most important part of the communication process. In addition to how there is a reciprocal relationship between communicators and communicants, social interaction also includes relationships affecting each other. In these interactions there is also an exchange of information flow that is part of the human nature to continue to learn and get information. Perception is also a form of information about other people that allows an interaction to occur.

The communication process can run effectively when each communicator and communicant has the same understanding of the meaning of each message that is exchanged. In the case of extension workers and farmers, there is a communication but it is not followed by interaction, or just one-direction communication. This picture is what happens in many villages. There are still many district, sub-district and village governments that have not interacted directly with residents. Although various stakeholders have tried to convey their ideas to the community, many people only receive information without interaction.

It is different from the pattern of communication carried out by *kiai* and the community. The communication process really happens and produces interaction. The communication process is not only a symbol transfer but there is a dynamic of interaction like how *kiai* understands the condition of the community, and is always dynamic in delivering messages according to the conditions of the community. What *kiai* does is part of the interaction process because it always includes three important elements, namely form, process, and content [4]. The pattern of interaction that has been done by *Kiai* mostly prioritizes these three things, so that the communication process runs effectively.

This pattern of interaction can be seen in a variety of religious activities. These religious activities include daily worship activities such as five daily prayers, weekly activities such as *tahlilan* (reading verses of the holy book), routine recitation activities every thirty-five days (*selapanan*), annual activities such as Islamic holidays, and incidental celebrations such as death, birth, marriage, and salvation. In addition there are also activities of community organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah (faith based organizations in Indonesia). Religious leaders are present at all times among citizens. A *kiai* not only plays a role in the religious field, but also plays a role in every matter, both social and government relations.

"... becoming a religious leader have many task in maintaining social problem and government policy." (Interview, Mei, 2019).

Geertz said that *kiaiparticipate* as cultural brokers (cultural, economic and political intermediaries) [5]. The existence of this cultural intermediary shows the influence of the *kiai* not only on religious matters but also on other aspects such as the economy, politics and culture of the community. *Kiai* as a person who is considered

to have advantages in terms of religion than ordinary people makes himself an influential figure in society. With the advantages it has, the *kiai* by the community are made leaders both in religious affairs, social affairs, and even agricultural affairs. The interaction between *kiai* and the community can be seen not only in the *pengajian* (teaching) forum, but also in the homes of villagers, village roads and wherever they meet. What is conveyed and done by *kiai* becomes an example for the community in living life.

"..*Kiai* presents *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) contextually which is able to be a solution to social problems. *Kiai* has a dual function as a legal reference and social engineering. *Kiai* as a leader in the midst of society is very influential because it has a strategic position.." (interview, Mei 2019)

Aside from acting as a cultural broker who seems passive in stemming various cultural currents that enter the community, it turns out that the *kiai* also play an active role in selecting the values that need to be developed in the community. *Kiai* acts as a communicator between Islam and the people in Java who are predominantly farmers. *Kiai* formulates the values that need to be developed in the community according to the character of the community [6]. *Kiai* in rural area create empowerment program. This activities such as planting trees, developing agricultural products, and Islamic education.

#### IV. Discussion

Every religious activity is inseparable from the role of the *kiai* because the *kiai* is the leader of each religious activity. The type of *kiai* leadership will influence the extent to which the knowledge and understanding of the community in the science of religion and relations among fellow members of society. The type of leadership of the transformative *kiai* will immediately respond and provide alternative solutions in addressing various problems that exist in society. This alternative solution is not only based on the idea of the *kiai* themselves but also based on community proposals.

The ability of religious leaders to mobilize their communities stems from the existence of communication skills in the context of the culture that has been built in the community. This culture includes one's beliefs, attitudes, diversity and relationships with one another. This causes easy communication between one another in a community [7].

Some types of leadership that are able to influence and direct members are charismatic and transformational types of leadership. One type of charismatic leadership was introduced by Max Weber about the charisma of religious leaders. Charisma is a personal quality of someone who can make that person influence their followers. Charisma is formed because of the strong emotional bond between leaders and those who are led [8]. Charismatic leadership has a significant influence on its members. The influences that arise include loyalty, trust, obedience, commitment, confidence in achieving goals, and fundamental changes in values and beliefs [9].

While transformational leaders motivate others to take actions that are beyond their expectations. Components of transformational leadership include idealized leadership by members, inspiring leadership, and intellectual leadership. Leadership is the ability to manage its members, foster and teach and fully support [10]. In transformational leadership, leadership is built on moral basis [11]. This moral includes the moral character of the leader and the values inherent in the vision, articulation and program of the leader. Morals and ethics come from family, school, law, and religion. Morals and ethics are part of the influencing process and empowering process of a leader.

In individual leadership, individual character can be seen from how to communicate. The leadership pattern of the transformational and charismatic *kiai* plays an important role in interaction with the community. *Kiai* as transformational and charismatic leaders have an impact on how easy it is to communicate with other individuals because of respect, trust, and also being able to provide motivation. The effective communication between the *kiai* and the community is strongly influenced by the *kiai's* leadership pattern. The more effective

communication that occurs, then the interaction that is built is also strong. This is what causes religious leaders to be able to be a catalyst and dynamist of various social development agendas that exist in society.

The massive interaction of *kiai* in every social activity of the community, coupled with the type of leadership that is transformational and charismatic, has grown trust in the religious leaders. religious and cultural interactions between community and religious leaders have formed a social capital [12]. This makes the relationship between the *kiai* and the community an important social capital in creating a social sustainability.

Social capital is a relationship that occurs and is bound by a trust (trust), mutual understanding (mutual understanding), and trust in the importance of shared values (shared values that bind groups to make the possibility of joint action can be carried out effectively and efficiently. Social capital such as cultural identity, tolerance, compassion, and community cohesion play an important role in shaping social sustainability [12]. The role of religious leaders in creating cohesion in society, is a social capital that plays an important role in mobilizing the community in a development agenda.

Social sustainability can be achieved through systematic community participation and strong involvement of civil society [12]. Communities that already have strong ties with religious leaders will be very easy to interact and convey various problems faced. The relationship between the *kiai* and the community has also formed a discussion room for the various issues. Religious leaders and communities work together to create harmonious relationships in order to create a community that cares about the condition of the village and village development.

## V. Conclusion

Religious leaders can play a role in creating social sustainability. Religious leaders are able to interact actively with the community. The transformational and charismatic leadership held by religious leaders in the village makes it easy for them to interact and form trust in the community. These relations have formed social capital that has a role in social sustainability. In addition, religious leaders can also act as agents in the success of the development agenda at the grassroots level.

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