

INCLUSIVE COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES IN EQUALITY CAMPAIGNS FOR THE DEAF COMMUNITY: A CASE STUDY OF THE SUNYI BERMAKNA COMMUNITY IN EAST KUTAI REGENCY, EAST KALIMANTAN, INDONESIA

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the inclusive communication strategies used by the Sunyi Bermakna (Meaningful Silence) community in campaigning for equality for the deaf in East Kutai. Using a qualitative case study approach, the research explores the practice of inclusive communication through in-depth interviews, observation, and document analysis. The findings show that Sunyi Bermakna utilizes sign language, visual media, social campaigns, and digital platforms to disseminate messages of equality. These strategies not only raise public awareness but also strengthen the position of the deaf community within an inclusive social environment. This study emphasizes the importance of inclusive communication in community public relations to foster understanding, reduce marginalization, and encourage social change.

Keywords: *Inclusive Communication, Deaf Community, Equality, Meaningful Silence*

INTRODUCTION

Hearing disability is a form of sensory limitation that significantly affects an individual's ability to communicate, access information, and fully participate in public spaces. WHO (2019) reports that approximately 466 million people worldwide experience hearing impairment, including 34 million children. In Indonesia, the 2010 Population Census recorded that 1.58% of the population has some degree of hearing limitation (Agus Diono, 2014). Persons with disabilities are members of society who require support in their daily activities due to physical conditions or neurological systems they possess. Society has the responsibility to respect, protect, and accept them as individuals whose rights are guaranteed under Law No. 39 of 1999 on Human Rights. The protection of human rights for vulnerable groups is an obligation of the state and all elements of society. In line with this, Syafiqoti and Hadiati (2023) emphasize that fulfilling accessibility rights for persons with disabilities constitutes a concrete form of nondiscriminatory human rights protection, while Ardi and Meidiasari (2020) show that the implementation of disability regulations requires the government to provide accessible basic services and facilities as part of fulfilling constitutional rights.

Law No. 8 of 2016 also explains that persons with disabilities are individuals who experience long-term physical, intellectual, mental, and/or sensory limitations that hinder their interactions with the environment and create difficulties in fully participating like other citizens. Their rights include the same entitlements possessed by all citizens, such as access to health, education, and legal protection. Article 11 of Law No. 8 outlines the right of persons with disabilities to obtain employment opportunities provided by the government or private sector without discrimination, as well as opportunities for career development and all inherent normative rights. Andayani (2020) found that despite being mandated by Law No. 8 of 2016, particularly Article 11, the fulfillment of employment rights for persons with disabilities still faces numerous implementation challenges in practice, even though the regulation normatively guarantees them.

Communication barriers often lead to social marginalization, discrimination, and limited access to education and employment. According to Harpini (2019), deaf individuals often struggle to become independent because communication limitations hinder their interaction with their social environment. This highlights the importance of developing inclusive communication strategies to reduce these gaps. Previous research has generally focused on limited accessibility of services and formal advocacy for persons with disabilities. Agusti (2019), for example, through a study on GERKATIN Jakarta, found that access to sign language services and public facilities remains far

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from optimal. However, studies that examine community-based inclusive communication strategies—particularly those involving public campaigns, digital media, and cross-sector collaboration—remain scarce, leaving a wide research gap regarding more participatory and adaptive advocacy approaches. The Sunyi Bermakna Community in East Kutai emerges as an inclusive space that not only supports deaf individuals but also educates the public through awareness campaigns. This is consistent with the findings of Hidayat, Almos, and Lintangsari (2023), who argue that enhancing accessibility and inclusivity for Deaf people in public spaces requires strong community support and improved public understanding. This study is important because it:

1. Presents a local case study in East Kutai, a region with limited research.
2. Provides insight into community-based inclusive communication strategies.
3. Fills a research gap by emphasizing communication strategies as tools for equality-focused campaigns.

This research is expected to contribute to the development of inclusive communication theory and provide practical recommendations for communities, academics, and policymakers in designing disability-friendly communication strategies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous Studies

Relevant research has been conducted regarding disability communication and equality. Agusti (2019), for instance, found that the social actions carried out by GERKATIN Jakarta to fight for accessibility for Deaf individuals have not yet been fully realized. Among the unmet needs are the recognition of sign language as a mother/natural language of the Deaf community, the absence of subtitles in Indonesian films in cinemas, and the lack of visual access in hospitals, banks, and schools. These findings indicate that the accessibility efforts advocated by the Indonesian Movement for the Welfare of the Deaf (GERKATIN Jakarta) have not been entirely fulfilled. A study by Purwati, Mansur, and Ruslita (2025) also highlights the low level of access to health communication for the Tuli-Bisu Kolok community in Bengkala Village, Bali, particularly regarding stunting prevention. Their study shows that government health information is not inclusive because it does not use local sign language nor appropriate visual media. As a result, Deaf residents do not receive adequate understanding of important health messages for their families and children. The authors emphasize that health communication strategies must integrate sign language, visual materials, and direct community assistance to ensure equal fulfillment of the right to information for persons with disabilities.

Furthermore, research by Maulia, Pienrasmi, and Waskito (2025) shows that empowerment communication at Caffe Lubi, which employs workers with hearing–speech disabilities, effectively enhances worker independence through visual communication approaches and sign language. The study reveals that an inclusive work environment not only provides accessible communication for persons with disabilities but also creates interactive two-way exchanges between workers and customers. The use of various communication media such as text boards, structured gestures, and sign language—helps minimize communication barriers, enabling workers to fully participate in service activities. The findings underscore the importance of adaptive communication support to broaden equitable employment opportunities for persons with disabilities. Oksiyana and Sunarto (2025) examine how SAPDA Yogyakarta implements inclusive communication strategies in advocating for the rights of children with disabilities by activating internal and external actor networks, utilizing information technology to reach children with disabilities, and developing accessible media as part of a systematic advocacy process. Their study finds that cross-sector collaboration (government, CSR, special needs schools, families) and well-designed accessible media serve as key enabling factors, while limited funding and human resources remain major challenges.

Theoretical Framework

Communication is a fundamental human need. As social beings, humans require interaction with others to convey information, emotions, ideas, perspectives, and attitudes. Trenholm and Jensen in Wiryanto (2004) define communication as a process in which a source transmits a message to a receiver through various channels that allow the message to be understood. According to Law No. 8 of 2016, persons with disabilities are individuals who have long-term physical, intellectual, mental, or sensory limitations. These conditions may hinder a person's ability to participate fully and effectively in society alongside other citizens, including in accessing and enjoying equal rights. The *Guidelines for the Implementation of Total Communication for Persons with Hearing and Speech Disabilities* (Ministry of Social Affairs, 2010:6) state that individuals with hearing–speech disabilities are those who, according to medical science, experience impairments in both hearing function and speech ability, making normal communication processes difficult to perform.

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Deafness (*tunarungu*) is a condition involving the loss of hearing ability, which prevents a person from optimally perceiving auditory stimuli, thereby significantly limiting the ability to receive information through the sense of hearing (T. Sutjihati, 2006:93). Equality derives from the term *setara*, meaning parallel, equal, comparable, or possessing the same degree (Sugono et al., 2008:1451). Thus, equality may be understood as a condition in which two or more parties are in a balanced position without hierarchical disparity. In social contexts, Dadang Supardan (2008:25) explains that equality refers to a situation in which individuals or groups have equal status, rights, and obligations. In other words, an equal society is one in which all members receive equal treatment without discrimination in access, opportunities, or social roles. Social equality is an essential foundation for sustaining diversity in society because it guarantees equal rights for every individual in both social and political spheres. Zaki et al. (2023) emphasize that equality is the basis for achieving harmony in social life. Similarly, Silalahi et al. (2025) demonstrate that equitable access and participation—particularly through innovation and digital empowerment—are critical prerequisites for realizing social justice in modern society.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative method aimed at obtaining a comprehensive and in-depth understanding based on the natural conditions of the case being investigated. The approach used is a single-category case study, which highlights the behavior of individuals or groups of individuals with significant issues, in which the researcher serves as the primary instrument. Yin (2000:25) states that the qualitative approach, particularly case studies, positions humans as the main instrument of research. This research is a descriptive case study that seeks to reveal the inclusive communication strategies used by the Sunyi Bermakna Community in campaigning for equality for Deaf individuals in East Kutai. Social constructivism assumes that individuals seek to understand the world in which they live and work. Individuals develop subjective meanings from their experiences, which are directed toward certain objects or phenomena. These meanings are broad and varied, leading researchers to explore the complexity of participants' perspectives rather than narrowing them into predefined categories or ideas (Creswell, 2009).

Qualitative research is an approach oriented toward naturally occurring phenomena, producing descriptive data in the form of words, narratives, or in-depth explanations from research subjects, and it does not aim to test hypotheses. Based on these characteristics, this study employs a case study approach because it allows the researcher to explore intensively the context, dynamics, and meaning of the situation being examined. This type of research collects data through interviews and observations related to the inclusive communication strategies implemented by the Sunyi Bermakna Community in advocating for equality for Deaf individuals. All data are integrated from various sources, while the researcher focuses on interpreting the meanings and explanations provided by informants to gain a deep understanding of the research objectives. The object of this research is the communication strategies used by the Sunyi Bermakna Community. The research subjects include community administrators, members, and parties involved in equality-oriented campaigns for Deaf individuals in East Kutai. Research requires accurate data as the basis for supporting and expanding the objectives to be achieved. Therefore, data collection techniques are used to obtain relevant information, enabling the researcher to deepen the analysis and broaden the scope of the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study reveals that the inclusive communication strategies implemented by the Sunyi Bermakna Community (SUKMA) are systematically designed to serve as a bridge for equitable interaction between Deaf individuals and the general public. Through a series of observations, interviews, and document analyses, it becomes evident that SUKMA not only provides communication spaces that are disability-friendly but also develops various programs focused on empowerment, education, and the reinforcement of equality principles in every form of interaction. The findings show that the establishment of Sunyi Bermakna (SUKMA) originated from the concern of its founder, Mrs. Arum, regarding the communication difficulties experienced by Deaf children in Sangatta, particularly those in their teenage years. Based on interviews, the primary motivation for founding the community stemmed from the worries of parents who realized that their children were still facing communication barriers in daily life. As stated by Mrs. Arum, "The beginning of Sukma was based on the concerns of parents and children at school, especially those in junior and senior high school, who still experienced obstacles when communicating with others." From this concern emerged the idea to provide additional classes of a social and non-profit nature. Support came from parents who offered space and helped encourage their children to participate in these classes. Initially, the activity took the form of sign language classes, and from this process emerged the name "Sunyi Bermakna" symbolizing a quiet world filled with meaning. As expressed by Mrs. Arum, "We agreed to name this community Sukma, meaning 'silent but meaningful,' because even though they cannot hear, they have a meaningful world."

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These sign language classes became the foundational component of SUKMA's inclusive communication practice. The activities were conducted for free and open to Deaf children, with the aim of improving their communication skills to prepare them for the professional world. Over time, the program expanded and attracted interest from university students, government office employees, and the general public who wished to learn sign language. According to Mrs. Arum, "Initially we focused on Deaf children, but many institutions and campuses wanted to join, including university students and civil servants." In line with the community's growth, SUKMA began broadening its activities by initiating various programs to avoid monotony. Support from student volunteers fostered innovations such as the introduction of local culture and tourism using inclusive approaches, as well as practical skills training for Deaf youth. These training programs included digital skills, creative content development, barista training in collaboration with local café entrepreneurs, and workshops on floral bouquet arrangement. All of these activities were carried out socially without fees and involved instructors who were willing to participate voluntarily.

Additionally, SUKMA established partnerships with the private sector and government institutions to expand participation opportunities for persons with disabilities. Inclusive internship programs became one of the tangible outcomes of these collaborations. Through these programs, participants not only gained technical training but also real work experience. According to Mrs. Arum, such initiatives also serve as evaluation material for developing future programs to better equip Deaf youth for employment and social life. The study also finds that all SUKMA programs are rooted in the values of inclusivity and mutual cooperation (*gotong royong*). As emphasized by Mrs. Arum, "We want to create a more inclusive environment so that society can accept the presence of persons with disabilities, especially those with hearing impairments." The community's hopes are directed not only toward the general public but also toward persons with disabilities themselves, encouraging them to gain confidence and develop their potential. Indonesian Sign Language (BISINDO) and visual media serve as the main pillars of SUKMA's communication strategy. All campaign activities are conducted using sign language to ensure that messages are equally accessible to everyone. Public sign language classes are held at the Royal Victoria Hotel Sangatta, with facilities provided by the hotel. These sessions are attended by approximately 60 percent Deaf participants and 40 percent hearing participants, indicating strong synergy between the community, the general public, and the private sector in creating inclusive communication spaces.

Furthermore, SUKMA collaborates with the East Kutai District Attorney's Office and Bank BRI KC Sangatta to conduct campaigns for inclusive public services. This collaboration has resulted in more disability-friendly public service practices and has broadened public awareness regarding equitable access. Through an annual event called Inclusive Camp, SUKMA also creates opportunities for dialogue and interaction between persons with disabilities and the general public to foster collective social awareness. In terms of technological literacy, SUKMA works with PT Kaltim Prima Coal to organize digital workshops aimed at improving the technological competencies of persons with disabilities. The training includes social media management, digital content writing, and the use of technology as a modern communication tool. These efforts demonstrate that SUKMA is oriented not only toward advocacy but also toward strengthening the digital competencies of the Deaf community. SUKMA also integrates environmental and cultural values into its communication programs. Coral reef transplantation activities serve as environmental education for Deaf participants, while the *Project Sapa Budaya* introduces local dance and cultural heritage as a medium for cross-group social interaction. Additionally, the *Project Buka Buku* functions as a literacy initiative that provides reading access for Deaf individuals and the general public. Through these programs, SUKMA demonstrates that inclusive communication can be developed across various aspects of social life. More broadly, SUKMA also runs the *Collabilities* program, which introduces the world of work to persons with disabilities. This program involves multiple stakeholders, including local government, educational institutions, social organizations, and the private sector. Such collaborations build a cross-sector ecosystem of inclusive communication that supports equality, empowerment, and social sustainability for persons with disabilities in East Kutai.

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Table 1. Collabilities Program Implemented by SUKMA

Nama Program	Fokus Kegiatan	Mitra Kolaborasi	Sasaran Peserta
Sign Language Class	Language & Visuals Language & Visuals	Royal Victoria Hotel Sangatta	60% deaf friends, 40% hearing friends
Inclusive Public Service Campaign	Social Services and Equality	Kutim Prosecutor's Office, BRI Sangatta Branch	Public servants and the general public
Digital Workshop	Technology and Social Media Literacy	PT Kaltim Prima Coal	People with disabilities and young volunteers
Project Sapa Budaya & Buka Buku Collabilities	Culture and Literacy The World of Work and an Inclusive Economy	Local artists, literacy community Kutim Regional Government, educational institutions, private sector	Deaf community and general public People with disabilities of productive age

Description: Data from field observations and interviews with SUKMA administrators (2025)

Discussion

The findings of this study show that the establishment of the Sunyi Bermakna Community (SUKMA) was driven by real needs within the community, particularly the concerns of parents regarding the communication limitations experienced by Deaf children. Thus, the inclusive communication strategies implemented by SUKMA are not merely the result of institutional planning but stem from the community's lived experience and empathy. This approach reflects a model of grassroots inclusive communication that grows from the bottom up, involving the community, families, and persons with disabilities directly. The use of Indonesian Sign Language (BISINDO) as the core of SUKMA's activities strengthens the linguistic identity of the Deaf community while bridging the gap between persons with disabilities and the general public. This supports Agusti's (2019) theory on the importance of recognizing sign language as a foundation for equitable communication. However, SUKMA advances this concept by creating inclusive interaction spaces through cross-sector collaboration, such as partnerships with the Royal Victoria Hotel and public institutions.

The skills training programs, digital workshops, and creative content initiatives illustrate that inclusive communication goes beyond message delivery; it includes efforts to enhance social and economic capacities. These findings reinforce Garcia and Kusters' (2020) argument on the significance of digital literacy in expanding access to information for persons with disabilities. SUKMA successfully translates this concept into the local context of East Kutai by integrating educational and practical approaches. The cultural, literacy, and environmental activities carried out by SUKMA also demonstrate an expanded dimension of inclusive communication. Through the *Sapa Budaya* and *Buka Buku* programs, SUKMA integrates social, cultural, and environmental values into its communication practices, creating participatory spaces that allow Deaf individuals to become social and cultural agents. This aligns with Nurdin (2023), who asserts that inclusive communication that involves persons with disabilities in social dialogues can dismantle barriers and foster harmony within society.

The discussion further highlights that cross-sector collaboration is a key element in the success of inclusive practices in East Kutai. The inclusive internship programs and partnerships with local MSMEs open pathways for the economic empowerment of persons with disabilities, enriching Lane, Hoffmeister, and Bahan's (2011) theory on Deaf community identity by adding a socio-economic empowerment dimension. Finally, the aspirations expressed by Mrs. Arum and SUKMA volunteers illustrate a commitment to sustainable inclusivity. Their goal extends beyond fostering societal acceptance of differences they aim to prepare a generation of persons with disabilities who are confident, independent, and empowered. As Mrs. Arum stated, "We want to create an inclusive environment so that society is ready to accept the presence of children with disabilities, and so that the children themselves feel confident in developing their potential."

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the establishment of the Sunyi Bermakna Community (SUKMA) originated from parents' concerns regarding the communication barriers faced by children with hearing impairments in Sangatta. Through a non-profit social initiative, the community successfully created an inclusive learning space, beginning

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with Sign Language Classes that later expanded into various skill-building and digital literacy programs for persons with disabilities. The findings affirm that SUKMA functions not only as an educational platform but also as a social bridge between persons with disabilities and the broader community. Collaboration with volunteers, educational institutions, small business actors, and government agencies positions SUKMA as an effective and sustainable model of community-based inclusive communication. Furthermore, SUKMA serves as a tangible example that disability empowerment can be achieved through participatory and humane approaches rather than purely assistance-based interventions. The community holds a strong aspiration to foster a more inclusive, equitable, and diversity-embracing social environment, while encouraging persons with disabilities to remain confident in developing their potential and contributing to society.

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