

Critical Review Article

Disempowered by Design: Information Inequality in the Age of Inclusive Growth

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Abstract

In an era where inclusive growth has become a global development mantra, this study critically examines a frequently overlooked dimension: information inequality. While infrastructure expansion and digital inclusion are often presented as pathways to empowerment, this research argues that many development efforts are structured in ways that silence marginalized voices, particularly in peripheral regions. Using a qualitative approach combining critical discourse analysis, interviews, and case studies from remote areas in Indonesia the study explores how development communication practices reflect and reproduce power imbalances. Findings reveal that dominant narratives frame poverty as a technical issue, exclude communities from meaningful participation, and centralizing communicative control in elite institutions. At the same time, grassroots actors engage in alternative communication strategies, highlighting their agency and resilience. The study concludes that true inclusion requires not just access, but the redistribution of communicative power, enabling communities to shape the narratives and policies that define their futures. Communication, therefore, must be recognized not merely as a channel, but as a site of justice, voice, and democratic engagement in the age of inclusive growth.

Keywords: Information inequality; Inclusive growth; Communication and development; Communicative justice; Poverty and marginalization

1. Introduction

In recent years, the idea of inclusive growth has become a dominant narrative in global and national development agendas. From UN Sustainable Development Goals to national strategic planning documents, governments and international institutions now widely endorse growth models that aim not only to raise economic output, but also to reduce inequality and improve the livelihoods of marginalized groups [1]. However, while inclusive growth is frequently invoked as a normative goal, its actual implementation often reveals a stark contradiction: communities most in need of empowerment are systematically excluded not only economically, but communicatively [2].

This paper argues that information inequality is a critical but often overlooked dimension of poverty and marginalization. In many so-called “inclusive” development initiatives, access to communication, participation in discourse, and control over narrative remain concentrated in the hands of elites’ governments, corporations, or urban-centric media ecosystems [3]. As a result, the

poor are not only economically marginalized but also disempowered by design: structurally silenced, misrepresented, or rendered invisible within the public sphere and policymaking processes. This disempowerment is not incidental it is embedded in the architecture of communication systems, the language of development policy, and the framing choices of mass media [4].

From a communication studies perspective, this contradiction invites deeper scrutiny. Development is not only an economic or political process, but also a discursive process, shaped by who gets to speak, what knowledge is considered valid, and how policies are framed and legitimized. As Paulo Freire and other critical communication theorists have long argued, the right to speak and be heard is a fundamental component of liberation. Without communicative inclusion, economic inclusion risks becoming superficial or symbolic [5].

This research situates its analysis at the intersection of development communication, critical media studies, and communication rights theory. It explores how information systems ranging from public information campaigns to media narratives and digital infrastructure can reproduce or challenge inequality. It pays particular attention to how communication structures reflect broader power relations, and how certain populations are structurally prevented from participating in the shaping of their own development trajectories [6].

In the context of Indonesia, this problem takes on urgent relevance. While the country has embraced the discourse of inclusive growth and digital transformation, the benefits remain unevenly distributed, especially across urban-rural, center-periphery, and socio-economic lines. In remote regions, access to reliable internet, quality journalism, and participatory platforms remains limited. In public discourse, voices from low-income and marginalized communities are underrepresented or stereotyped. Government communication about development projects is often top-down, with limited space for dialogue, deliberation, or dissent [7].

This paper builds on a series of qualitative case studies and discourse analyses focused on how marginalized communities are positioned within the narrative space of development [8]. Through textual analysis of policy documents, media content, and interviews with community media actors, the study reveals that growth is often framed in technocratic or statistical terms, leaving little room for the lived experiences of poverty and inequality [9]. Moreover, official narratives frequently emphasize "empowerment" or "inclusion" while failing to acknowledge the information barriers that prevent actual participation.

The central hypothesis of this paper is that without addressing communication inequality, inclusive growth cannot be genuinely inclusive. Development narratives that silence the poor, development policies that ignore community input, and digital systems that exacerbate access gaps all contribute to a politics of exclusion disguised as progress. By framing the issue of inequality not only in terms of income or opportunity but also in terms of voice, visibility, and representation, this paper expands the scope of what inclusion must entail in the communication age [10].

Ultimately, this research seeks to answer the following questions:

- How does information inequality shape the experiences of poverty within development processes?
- In what ways do official narratives of inclusive growth obscure or reproduce patterns of exclusion?
- What role can participatory communication and media reform play in democratizing development discourse?

These questions are approached through a critical-interpretive lens, grounded in the belief that development must be communicative not merely delivered to people, but co-constructed with them. The power to shape narratives, ask questions, and make demands is not a luxury of the empowered; it is a right that must be safeguarded if development is to be just.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Communication Inequality and Structural Disempowerment

The concept of communication inequality refers to unequal access to information,

communication technologies, and platforms for expression and participation. Napoli (2011) defines communication inequality as a multidimensional problem involving disparities in information access, media literacy, and the capacity to produce and circulate messages. In development contexts, this inequality is often intertwined with pre-existing socio-economic disparities, particularly in remote, rural, and low-income areas [11].

Research has shown that communication inequality contributes to broader forms of social exclusion, as communities lacking access to reliable information are also less able to access public services, mobilize politically, or advocate for their needs (Viswanath & Finnegan, 1996). In other words, they become invisible not just in economic terms, but also in communicative terms excluded from decision-making processes, public discourse, and the construction of meaning around development [12].

2.2 Participatory Communication and Development Justice

Against this backdrop, scholars of participatory communication have long argued for a shift away from top-down models of development communication toward horizontal, dialogic, and locally driven approaches. Pioneers like Paulo Freire (1970) emphasized that meaningful empowerment begins with the ability of communities to name their reality, engage in collective dialogue, and co-create solutions.

Contemporary models, such as Communication for Social Change (CFSC), build on this by promoting community-owned media, grassroots communication networks, and the use of ICTs (information and communication technologies) for empowerment. However, despite their promise, participatory approaches are often undermined by structural barriers, including lack of infrastructure, funding, or political will especially in marginal regions [11].

The gap between rhetoric and practice in participatory development is especially visible in digital governance initiatives. While inclusion is often promised in official frameworks, digital tools are frequently designed without consulting the communities they are meant to serve resulting in what some call "symbolic inclusion", where visibility is achieved but voice remains constrained.

2.3 Framing, Narrative Power, and the Politics of Representation

Framing theory (Goffman, 1974; Entman, 1993) offers valuable insight into how communication contributes to social inequality. Frames are not neutral; they shape how problems are defined, who is seen as responsible, and what solutions are deemed appropriate. In the context of inclusive growth, dominant media and government narratives often frame poverty as a technical challenge (to be solved through efficiency or innovation) rather than a structural injustice rooted in unequal power relations [13].

Moreover, mainstream narratives tend to privilege economic indicators (e.g., GDP, investment, productivity) while overlooking lived experiences, community perspectives, and the emotional dimensions of exclusion. This reflects what Couldry (2010) calls a "crisis of voice" a situation where certain groups cannot meaningfully participate in defining the reality that affects them. By examining how inclusion is framed in policy discourse and media, this study reveals the discursive mechanisms through which inequality is maintained even in the name of equity [14].

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative interpretive approach, combining three methods [15]:

3.1 Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

CDA is used to examine how inclusive growth is represented in policy documents, government communication, and media coverage. It focuses on the language used to define poverty, empowerment, and development and reveals how power operates through discourse (Fairclough,

1995). Key questions:

- Who is portrayed as the agent of development?
- Whose voices are included or excluded?
- How are the causes of inequality framed?

3.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

Interviews were conducted with:

- Community media practitioners in rural Indonesia
- NGO communication officers working on digital inclusion
- Local government communication staff

These interviews explore perceptions of communication access, participation in policymaking, and challenges in media engagement from both sides of the power divide [16].

3.3 Case Study: Indonesian Digital Divide

A focused case study on communication inequality in Indonesia's periphery regions specifically remote or under-connected areas in eastern Indonesia (e.g., Nusa Tenggara Timur, Maluku Utara, or border islands such as Talaud or Natuna). The case study documents how information deserts areas with limited media access and poor connectivity interact with poverty and development policy [17].

Data collection methods:

- Field observations (where feasible)
- Secondary data (digital inclusion reports, statistics)
- Content analysis of regional media and national policy language
- The aim is not to generalize, but to provide thick description of how exclusion plays out communicatively in everyday contexts.

4. Case Example: The Digital Divide in Indonesia's Periphery

Despite significant progress in digital infrastructure in urban centers, many peripheral and remote regions in Indonesia continue to experience what researchers describe as deep digital exclusion [18]. These areas often overlap with zones of economic hardship facing challenges such as:

- Limited or unreliable internet access
- Low digital literacy
- Absence of community media or participatory platforms
- Over-centralized messaging from Jakarta-based agencies

One example can be seen in parts of Maluku Utara, where local fishers receive little to no information about marine zoning, fishing permits, or development programs that affect their livelihoods. Public announcements are typically distributed via printed posters at district offices miles away from coastal settlements and are often written in technocratic or legal language. Interviews with community members revealed that most had no say in how these programs were designed, despite being directly affected by them [19].

Similarly, in eastern Nusa Tenggara, school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately impacted poor students not only because of limited internet access, but also because of top-down communication practices. Educational broadcasts on television failed to address local languages or culturally relevant content. Families reported feeling alienated and left behind, not just economically, but communicatively [20].

These examples illustrate how digital inequality intersects with policy design and media access, creating a multi-layered form of exclusion. Even when infrastructure is present, the lack of participatory processes and communication justice limits the transformative potential of information technologies.

5. Findings and Thematic Analysis

Through critical discourse analysis, interviews, and a regional case study, several interrelated themes emerged that illustrate how information inequality persists and reproduces exclusion under the banner of inclusive growth. Below are the key thematic findings:

5.1 Symbolic Inclusion vs. Structural Exclusion

Across multiple policy documents and official campaigns, the language of “empowerment,” “digital inclusion,” and “community-based development” is widely used. However, interviews with community members, NGO actors, and local media practitioners consistently described a gap between rhetorical inclusion and practical disempowerment.

In official documents, terms such as “inovasi untuk semua” (innovation for all) or “pertumbuhan yang merata” (equitable growth) were repeated frequently but without clear mechanisms to involve marginalized communities in the process. At the ground level, communities described feeling “invited but unheard”: consulted through surveys or token public meetings but excluded from actual decision-making.

5.2 Technocratic Framing of Poverty and Exclusion

The language used in both media and policy documents tends to frame poverty and inequality as technical problems solvable through infrastructure, digitization, or programmatic rollout. Interviews with communication staff in local government agencies revealed a consistent belief that “access equals empowerment”, implying that simply providing internet or devices would close the gap.

However, community media actors challenged this logic. As one said, “Jaringan internet itu penting, tapi percuma kalau kami tidak tahu bagaimana memanfaatkannya atau kalau suara kami tidak dianggap.” (The internet is important, but it’s useless if we don’t know how to use it or if our voices don’t count.). This reflects a key insight: access does not equal agency. Without supportive communication ecosystems, including media literacy, local content production, and participatory forums, digital inclusion remains shallow.

5.3 Centralized Messaging and Peripheral Silencing

Respondents in periphery areas (e.g., Eastern Indonesia, border islands) consistently described the development discourse as “from Jakarta, for Jakarta” meaning that messages about inclusive growth are produced by central authorities, for elite consumption. One local NGO representative explained how national media often covered development successes with little to no mention of local struggles, creating a narrative dissonance: while the state celebrates “inclusive development,” the lived reality of many communities is one of continued exclusion. Furthermore, central government campaigns were often delivered in formal Indonesian or bureaucratic language, limiting comprehension for rural populations, especially older individuals and those in multilingual regions.

5.4 Participatory Communication as Resistance

Amid these challenges, the study found evidence of grassroots innovation in communication practices. In several 3T areas, community radio, WhatsApp groups, local theatre, and village bulletin boards have been used to fill the information gaps left by official communication channels.

These informal systems act as resistance infrastructures reclaiming agencies, countering state narratives, and asserting local knowledge. In one coastal village in Maluku, youth groups produced short video clips about illegal fishing and shared them via mobile phones to build local awareness

and influence village policy. This theme points to a critical insight: when formal communication fails, communities improvise but such improvisation occurs despite the system, not because of it.

6. Discussion and Theoretical Reflection

The findings underscore the reality that information inequality is not incidental, but rather a structural component of how development operates under neoliberal and technocratic paradigms. From a political economy of communication perspective, we see that control over information, narrative, and representation is unequally distributed mirroring broader patterns of power and capital [21]. Drawing from Framing Theory (Entman, 1993), poverty is framed in ways that obscure structural causes and center individual or community deficits.

Rather than presenting inequality as an outcome of systemic exclusion, policy narratives focus on “solutions” that emphasize infrastructure and behavior change, effectively depoliticizing development. At the same time, Participatory Communication Theory (Freire, 1970; Gumucio-Dagron, 2001) reminds us that voice and dialogue are essential conditions for empowerment. The communities in this study exhibited strong agencies but this agency remains fragile when not institutionally supported. The absence of durable platforms for expression, deliberation, and community media means that participatory practices remain localized and fragmented [22].

Furthermore, Couldry’s “voice framework” (2010) applies powerfully here: when systems deny people the capacity to be heard, to be taken seriously, or to contribute to public discourse, this amounts to a denial of citizenship. Thus, inclusive growth without communicative inclusion is not truly inclusive, it is performative. Theoretically, this research calls for a reframing of development communication not just as a tool for delivering messages, but as a space of struggle over meaning, access, and voice. It affirms that communication is power, and as long as that power remains centralized, inequality will persist no matter how progressive the rhetoric.

7. Conclusions

This study has demonstrated that information inequality plays a central, yet often overlooked, role in reproducing poverty and marginalization, even within development frameworks that claim to be inclusive. By analyzing how development is communicated who speaks, who is heard, and how messages are framed it becomes clear that current communication systems are structurally biased toward elite narratives. As a result, peripheral and marginalized communities remain not only economically excluded but also communicatively disempowered, unable to meaningfully shape or contest the policies that affect their lives.

Inclusive growth cannot be achieved through infrastructure development or expanded digital access alone. What is needed is a structural transformation in how communication is conceptualized, designed, and governed. Real empowerment begins not with the dissemination of content, but with the redistribution of communicative power, the ability of individuals and communities to participate in shaping development discourse and decisions. In this light, communication is not merely a tool for development, but a space of struggle for voice, recognition, and justice.

Several policy recommendations emerge from this analysis. First, governments and development institutions must institutionalize participatory communication platforms at village and district levels to ensure that communities have formal and ongoing mechanisms to express needs, influence policy, and hold decision-makers accountable [23]. Second, there is an urgent need to support community media and local content production, especially in indigenous and minority languages, to decentralize narrative authority and reflect diverse realities within the national development conversation.

Third, media literacy and communication rights should be integrated into educational curricula, with a focus on empowering historically excluded groups particularly women and youth to critically access, evaluate, and produce information. Fourth, state communication strategies must move

away from one-way, top-down messaging, toward more dialogic and culturally responsive approaches that prioritize clarity, accessibility, and inclusion.

Finally, bridging the digital divide must be pursued through equity-based infrastructure planning, where investments in connectivity and technology prioritize underserved, remote, and marginalized communities, not just urban commercial centers. Without this, development risks reinforcing existing inequalities under the guise of progress.

By recognizing that voice and visibility are not luxuries, but foundational elements of justice, this study calls for a development paradigm that treats communication as a right, not merely a resource. Only when communicative power is distributed more equitably can growth be truly inclusive not just in statistical outcomes, but in lived experiences, public discourse, and democratic participation.

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