

Sustainable Development Goals Communication Policy on Local Government Units through Four Discourses in Communication Research

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Abstract

This paper critically examines how local government units (LGUs) in Davao Oriental, Philippines, can articulate their engagement with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) communication policies. The analysis uses Mumby's (1997) four discourses of communication research—representation, understanding, suspicion, and vulnerability—as a theoretical lens. It challenges traditional technocratic and hierarchical paradigms that view participation primarily as a consultative process, thereby obscuring the underlying power dynamics that shape such interactions. The discussion emphasizes the complex temporality of participation, highlighting its multifaceted nature as experienced, negotiated, and sometimes simulated within social, political, and cultural contexts. The argument suggests that participation should be understood not just as measurable engagement but also as a discursive, contested, and emotional process rooted in power relations. The essay calls for more inclusive, regenerative, and future-oriented communication strategies that amplify marginalized voices and support democratic governance. It contributes to the field of sustainability communication by proposing an integrated analytical framework to enhance understanding of participation in local governance and policy implementation.

Keywords: participation, Sustainable Development Goals, communication policy.

Introduction

Communication scholars often ask questions that examine how appropriate or inappropriate communication is. These are the questions of value. Closely tied to these are questions of policy, which ask how the communication phenomena under study effect how communication should be practiced (Stacks & Hocking, 1992, cited by Stacks & Walsen, 2019, p. 6). For researchers in the field, it is beneficial to critically assess the overarching objectives of communication research, especially within applied contexts such as sustainability communication, which are inherently linked to pressing real-world issues related to governance, sustainability, and development.

The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have become a crucial framework for promoting equitable and sustainable development in global challenges

like climate change, social inequality, and economic disparities. Key to achieving these goals is communication, which acts as both a means of sharing information and a tool for encouraging collective action (Franson, 2018).

As the deadline for the Sustainable Development Goals approaches in 2030, Hirst and Spellman (2024) argue that the aspirations to meet the internationally acknowledged UN Sustainable Development Goals, which are designed to reform the socio-economic system for greater equity, inclusivity, regeneration, and sustainability, have significantly diminished. Even with commendable goals for sustainable development, achieving this ideal has faced numerous challenges. In the context of sustainable development, communication extends beyond merely exchanging information and becomes a platform where conflicting narratives, ideologies, and interests converge. Participatory communication, which focuses on community involvement in decision-making, can democratize development efforts and amplify marginalized voices. Hofvenschioeld & Khodadadi (2020, p.10) highlight that the essential dialogue surrounding participation in communication revolves around scenario development. This process serves as a strategy input and policy creation aimed at collaboratively developing and incorporating scenarios with decision-makers into strategies and policies.

While participation is central to SDGs, its framing often reflects power structures that prioritize top-down, technocratic approaches over systemic and regenerative alternatives. Local government units (LGUs) often frame participation as consultative processes through formalized public hearings, stakeholder meetings, and barangay assemblies (Work, 2002).

Emerging concepts, such as regenerative futures, challenge the limitations of mainstream sustainability discourse by advocating for relational, systemic, and localized approaches rooted in ecological and social harmony (Villegas & Ponce, 2024). Regenerative futures are two-pronged concepts from regenerative development that goes beyond sustainability (Gibbons, 2020; Ponce & Villegas, 2022), and futures thinking uses a tool and methodology that employs strategic foresight and reimagine the futures (Inayatullah, 2008; Ponce & Villegas, 2022; Canina, Bruno, & Monetier, 2022; Salite et al, 2024; Berise et al, 2025).

In this essay, I explore the epistemological dimension of sustainability communication, specifically, how participation is framed in communication policies toward SDGs by local government units in Davao Oriental. I situate my inquiry within Mumby's (1997) four discourses on communication research: representation, understanding, suspicion, and vulnerability. Engagement with these frameworks has necessitated a re-examination of the conceptualization to study participation. Putnam (2001) emphasized that to "connect within the field is to bring different discourses to bear on broad-based policy issues and social problems (p. 46)."

Discourse of Representation

The discourse of representation treats communication as a neutral conduit for transmitting information, where meaning is assumed to pre-exist and can be represented accurately through empirical data (Mumby, 1997). Many studies on participation in communication remain insufficiently explored in this discourse. Typically, privileged research focuses on qualitative or conceptual papers, particularly using critical framing analysis to explore the various interpretations and implications of partnerships, empowerment, and rights, as well as their interconnections within the

Sustainable Development Goals (Spencer, Corbin, and Miedena, 2019), and analysis questions whether participation fosters true empowerment or is appropriated by those in power to preserve the existing order (White, 1999). Although there are studies that measure public policy on the SDGs that relate budget allocation and indicators (Sisto et al., 2020), as well as transparency in government sustainability practices that address public information disclosure (Alcaraz-Quiles, Navarro-Galera, & Ortiz-Rodriguez, 2014), but examining how differences in stakeholders' access to information, socioeconomic status, and communication channels affect their participation in the communication policy processes towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) among Local Government Units (LGUs) in Davao Oriental, is underexplored.

Meanwhile, Stacks and Salwen (2019) emphasized that "one cannot conduct good research without theory and good theory development requires good verification (p. 4)." Stemming from Knowledge Gap Theory by Phillip Tichenor, George Donohue, and Clarice Olien (Littlejohn and Foss, 2009, p. 811) it posits that as information about the SDGs is disseminated, stakeholders with higher levels of education, income, and media access are more likely to acquire this information and engage actively in governance processes, while marginalized sectors may remain excluded. Understanding these disparities is essential for creating inclusive communication strategies that promote fair stakeholder participation in SDG policy development and execution at the local level. The importance of citizen participation is underscored, with information sharing being crucial for empowering citizens to actively engage in achieving the SDGs (Ozaki & Shaw, 2022). This discourse prioritizes fixed meanings and clear-cut interpretations, seeking predictability and control over communication (Mumby, 1997; Beatty, 2014). So, the communication is assessed based on efficacy rather than its role in constructing reality.

Discourse of Understanding

Moving into the discourse of understanding from the lens of an interpretivist modernist orientation, it treats communication as a meaning-making process grounded in cultural, historical, and dialogic contexts (Mumby, 1997). Instead of asking how much participation happens, this discussion focuses on how different community actors experience participation. In this perspective, participation isn't an objective thing to measure but a subjective, evolving process negotiated through communication.

Weder, Lemke, and Tunganat (2019) present storytelling as a powerful method for exploring how individuals narrate their involvement (or lack thereof) in SDG initiatives. In Davao Oriental, local stakeholders may have very different stories about what participation means to them, influenced by their community's values, histories, and social structures. From a qualitative research perspective using the Sense-Making Theory by Brenda Dervin (Littlejohn and Foss, 2009), it raises the question of how different stakeholders in Davao Oriental (LGU officials, community leaders, citizens) interpret their participation or non-participation in SDG-related communication policy. Public perceptions of SDGs differ, with some goals receiving higher approval than others, indicating that correcting these misunderstandings could boost participation and policy efforts (Bautista-Puig et al. 2024).

Government officials often see participation as a way to improve governance and policy implementation, as demonstrated in Japan, where the government has increased opportunities for stakeholder engagement to support SDG initiatives, although the impact on government strategies remains uncertain (Amanuma et al., 2024). Ștefănescu & Alexandrescu (2022) emphasized the importance of tailored communication

strategies that connect with local needs, which boosts community participation and acceptance of sustainable development efforts. However, challenges persist, where top-down approaches to SDG programs have limited genuine participation, suggesting a need for more effective socialization and communication strategies to foster local participation (Sulistyowati et al., 2023). The diversity in stakeholder perceptions is further complicated by differing attitudes towards participatory instruments, where citizens, politicians, and civil servants have distinct preferences, potentially creating new gaps in participation (Wauter et al., 2024). These studies establish how participation is negotiated in moments of uncertainty, disconnection, and perceived exclusion, where stakeholders attempt to construct meaning. Putnam (2001) posits that "in order to improve dialogue across the field, the notion of voice. It embodies who can speak, when, and in what ways. As a metaphor for communication studies, this construct calls attention to unique perspectives that are often ignored, silenced, or misunderstood. It highlights the way voices become distorted through power relationships embedded in ideology and domination and ways to gain access to and create opportunities for participation. An important contribution that voice makes to our field is revealing the invisible aspects of social arrangements or the ways that some voices become privileged and others are marginalized (p. 41)."

Discourse of Suspicion

Shifting to the discourse of suspicion, a critical modernist stance rooted in critical theory (Mumby, 1997; Littlejohn and Foss, 2009). Participation in SDG studies primarily focused on grassroots, community-driven, and bottom-up approaches through critical discourse analysis and textual analysis. Various sustainability and development frameworks emphasize civil society, the private sector, and international institutions as key players in participatory efforts. Despite highlighting participation in governance and policymaking, there is a lack of studies specifically investigating government participation in the SDGs. While local government units (LGUs) are often considered 'facilitators' or 'enablers,' their narratives regarding their desires are usually not heard in participation studies. Another point is that much of the literature focuses on success stories, best practices, and policy recommendations. It often focuses on the community rather than critically analyzing power struggles, exclusionary practices, or institutional failures within governance itself.

To provide a deeper meaning of participation through the LGUs' lens, the use of Foucault Discourse Analysis (FDA) to examine the stories of local government units and how participation makes sense with them when crafting communication policy towards SDGs must be mainstreamed. FDA involves identifying how specific statements, concepts, and practices create and reinforce certain understandings of the world, often excluding or marginalizing alternative perspectives (Powers, 2007; Diaz-Bone et al., 2007; Graham, 2005). Using this theory and method, according to Diaz-Bone et al. (2007), "are no longer restricted to linguistic or other sciences of language use...it conceives discourse as social structure and discursive practice as social practice."

Ala-Uddin (2019) posited that the universalist language of participation in the SDGs argues that while the agenda claims to be "of the people, by the people, for the people," actual decision-making power remains with governments, international institutions, and corporations.

Foucault's view is that participation might not be about emancipation but could serve as a form of surveillance and regulation, where communities are included in ways that still conform to existing power structures (Hook, 2001). Critics argue that it can

create a false sense of empowerment, overlooking the underlying power structures that limit genuine participation (Melkote & Steeves, 2015).

Discourse of Vulnerability

While exploring the studies on participation in communication policy within Local Government Units (LGUs), I became increasingly intrigued by alternative research approaches that transcend rigid methods, strict categories, and uniform evaluation frameworks. Conventional methods often require us to define and quantify participation while situating it within procedural contexts. However, can participation be entirely captured through checklists or surveys? What if it is something felt, performed, narrated, or even resisted in ways that escape conventional forms of documentation? Informed by Mumby's (1997) postmodern perspective, that there is no privileged position for the knower in relation to what is to be known. This challenges traditional notions of authority and expertise, recognizing that all knowledge is situated, partial, and constructed within particular discursive and power-laden contexts (Deetz, 1996; Mumby, 1997).

I am fascinated by Jean Baudrillard's concept of hyperrealism in film, which claims that in postmodern societies, representations can become so exaggerated or detached from their original context that they replace or simulate reality itself (Alirezaei, Moradkhani, & Sojoodi, 2020; Wolny, 2017). What if participation can be simulated through well-staged scenarios, where actors are so skilled that you can no longer tell the difference between acting and reality? This idea comes from the concept of the Escherian Stairwell in Michael Lacanilao's (2023) documentary film. This highly convincing hoax led millions to believe that an impossible, physics-defying staircase existed. This approach is not new; hyperreality is also evident in "Surat Cinta Untuk Kartini," where the blending of historical reality with fantasy is achieved through actors' portrayals and language use that simulate past realities, combining them with fictional elements to create a seamless narrative experience (Bariqoh et al., 2018). Similarly, in "Memories of My Body," hyperreality is manifested through the portrayal of gender concepts, where the film uses the body as a simulacrum to explore themes of masculinity and femininity, thus creating an image detached from conventional reality (Kurniasih et al., 2020).

From this angle, research on participation using film explores familiar scenes with convincing dialogue that show how actors are "empowered" through their involvement in LGUs' communication strategies on SDGs. The goal is to describe participation in terms of "false consciousness" (Mumby, 1997; Szacki, 1966). In this context, it could reveal whether participation truly promotes the empowerment and emancipation of the target audience. Empowerment is a term used to describe a group of people who utilize their abilities, resources, and cultural systems to improve their well-being. Much has been discussed and implemented regarding empowerment, including theories, communication strategies, and methods, with various approaches adopted to achieve its goals for people. While Gramsci, according to Hoare and Smith (1971), did not directly employ the term 'empowerment,' his writings offer a framework for understanding empowerment as a process that involves gaining awareness, agency, and the collective ability to question and alter societal structures' domination. Paolo Mafalopulos (2008) explained empowerment as a "contrast while power refers to the level of control one has over others, empowerment is more about an internal process condition" and as stated by Cornwall (2000: 33) cited in Mefolopulos (2008), "it is not

something that can be done to people, but something people do by and for themselves” (p.42).

More so, this type of research, which focuses on creativity, is often overlooked in studies of participation. Understanding how individuals feel empowered, excluded, or changed through creative research can illuminate their emotional and relational experiences. Consequently, this human-centered approach may uncover the emotional aspects of participation that both quantitative and qualitative methods tend to miss. In this context, the discourse of vulnerability, can introduce additional perspectives that challenge the technocratic bias inherent in empirical methods and promote a broader understanding of participation.

Conclusion

Reflecting on these four discourses has enhanced author’s understanding of how participation can be conceptualized, examined, and assessed in sustainability communication. Each offers a distinct perspective on the complexities of participation in SDG policies by LGUs in Davao Oriental. The representation discourse highlights objectivity and measurement, understanding values emphasizes context and interpretation, suspicion focuses on critique and power dynamics, and vulnerability values affect, creativity, and ambiguity. By considering these discourses, we can utilize each paradigm’s strengths while remaining critically aware of their limitations. Putnam (2001) states that “coming together means we find connections across the field that reveal new understanding and new visions for our work (p. 48).” This essay underscores that the way we frame participation significantly influences the knowledge we generate and the potential we envision, especially as we approach 2030, the deadline for Sustainable Development Goals, if we genuinely achieve democratic, inclusive, and transformative communication policies in sustainability.

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