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## **The Role and Functions of Public Relations in Managing Social Conflicts Between Companies and Local Communities: A Case Study of PT Satria Bahana Sarana, Tanjung Enim, South Sumatra**

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### **Keywords:**

public relations, social conflict, pt satria bahana sarana, conflict management, persuasive communication

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### **Abstract**

Social conflicts between companies and local communities often arise due to differences in interests, expectations, and communication gaps. This study aims to analyze the role and functions of Public Relations (PR) in managing social conflicts between *PT Satria Bahana Sarana* and the surrounding community in Tanjung Enim, South Sumatra. The research adopted a qualitative descriptive approach using a case study method within a constructivist-critical paradigm. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation involving eight informants, including PR staff, company management, community representatives, and related stakeholders. The findings reveal that social conflicts are generally low in intensity but triggered by factors such as miscommunication, differences in interests, high community expectations, uneven information distribution, and delayed responses. PR plays strategic roles as a communication bridge, mediator, information manager, and implementer of persuasive and preventive communication. The study also shows that PR applies five conflict management styles accommodating, avoiding, collaborating, compromising, and competing depending on the situation. Supporting factors include strong management support, responsive communication, and CSR programs, while inhibiting factors involve organizational hierarchy and limited coordination. In conclusion, effective PR strategies significantly contribute to maintaining harmonious relationships and preventing conflict escalation through adaptive and transparent communication practices.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The phenomenon of social conflict between companies and local communities is generally triggered by unbalanced dynamics of interests and power relations. Coser (1956) explained that conflicts often arise when two groups have conflicting interests and fight for the same resources. In the context of the company's relationship with the community, this tension often occurs due to the perception of injustice, the impact of the company's operations on the surrounding environment, and the gap in meeting expectations between the two parties. This condition is in line with Wirawan's (2010) view that organizational conflicts with communities are part of conflicts of interest that arise due to differences in positions, aspirations, and needs.

Pruitt and Rubin (2004) say that social conflict will increase when the interacting parties have misaligned basic interests. Companies are oriented towards productivity and sustainability

of operations, while local communities demand safety, benefits, and alignment over their living spaces (Adikwu et al., 2023; Corbett, 2024; DiBella et al., 2023; Kandpal et al., 2024; Prasanna et al., 2025; Stroumpoulis et al., 2024). This misalignment of interests is often reinforced by the lack of integration of stakeholder perspectives, as explained by Freeman (1984), that companies need to understand and manage the interests of the affected groups to prevent rejection and social friction.

*PT Satria Bahana Sarana (SBS)*, an affiliate company of *PT Bukit Asam Tbk* engaged in coal mining services in the Tanjung Enim area, Muara Enim Regency, South Sumatra Province, is inseparable from the dynamics of the social conflict. Founded in March 2004, the company has been running various Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programs since 2015. However, the implementation of CSR programs does not always run smoothly. Based on a report by Kabar Nusantara (2024), the community once rejected the activities of *PT SBS* vehicles that passed on village roads because they caused road damage and noise. This condition shows that conflict is not just a potential, but a reality that must be managed professionally by the company through the Public Relations function.

According to Ruslan (2007), Public Relations or Public Relations has a very important role in a company, namely managing communication between the organization and the public. Gregory (2022) explained that Public Relations management is a process that involves planning, organizing, communicating, and coordinating rationally and systematically to achieve organizational goals. In the context of conflict management, the functions of Public Relations include: being a communication mediator, supporting publication activities, and creating a positive image of the company.

Based on this description, this research focuses on the role and function of Public Relations of *PT Satria Bahana Sarana* in managing social conflicts between the company and the local community. The formulation of this research problem is: what is the role and function of Public Relations of *PT Satria Bahana Sarana* in managing social conflicts with local communities? The research aims to analyze the factors that cause social conflicts, the role and function of Public Relations in conflict management, supporting and inhibiting factors, and the communication strategies applied.

### ***Theoretical Foundations***

This study uses the main theory of Conflict Management Styles from Thomas and Kilmann (in Wirawan, 2010) which develops five conflict management strategies: Accommodating, Avoiding, Collaborative, Compromise, and Competing. This theory is relevant because the company's public relations play a role in determining the right conflict management strategy according to the situation between the company and the local community.

According to Cutlip, Center, and Broom (2006), public relations is a management function that builds and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and the public. Public Relations is not only in charge of conveying information, but also being a mediator and problem solver. The theory of symmetrical two-way communication Grunig and Hunt (1984) emphasizes the importance of balanced dialogue between organizations and society. Through symmetrical two-way communication, Public Relations can build harmonious relationships and reduce the potential for social conflict.

Coombs (2007) through Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) emphasized that the success of an organization in dealing with conflicts or crises is greatly influenced by

the communication strategy applied. Meanwhile, Suchman's (1995) theory of legitimacy emphasizes that legitimacy is the perception of society that organizational actions are in accordance with the prevailing social value system, norms, and beliefs. This is where the function of Public Relations becomes crucial in maintaining the social license to operate through transparent communication and corporate social responsibility.

The role of Public Relations is a manifestation of the organization's communication function in bridging the interests between the company and its public. Dozier and Broom (1995) distinguish the role of Public Relations into the Communication Technician Role and the Communication Manager Role. In the context of PT SBS, Public Relations plays the role of a communicator, mediator, and problem solver who bridges harmonious two-way communication.

Ruslan (2013) explained that the functions of Public Relations include Communication Service (communication services), Relationship Building (relationship building), and Crisis Management (crisis management). These functions are particularly relevant in the context of social conflict, where Public Relations is responsible for maintaining an honest flow of information, preventing misunderstandings, and creating a space for constructive dialogue.

The relationship between Public Relations and social conflict management is rooted in the main function of Public Relations as a mediator of communication between the organization and the public. Annisa (2022) emphasizes that an effective media relations strategy involves three stages: managing relationships with the media, developing communication strategies, and building a network of cooperation. Pandiangan and Ratnasari (2023) emphasized that information transparency is the main key in building public trust and preventing social tensions.

**Table 1. Previous Research**

Yes	Name/Year	Purpose	Method	Results	Contributions
1	Fitria Nur Annisa (2022) – Public Relations Media Relations Strategy in Building a Positive Image of the Bekasi City Government	Knowing the media relations strategy of the Public Relations of the Bekasi City Regional Secretariat	Qualitative descriptive; In-depth interviews, observations, documentation	Public Relations Strategy involves three stages: managing media relations, developing communication strategies, and building a network of cooperation	Relevant in managing communication during social conflicts to build a positive image
2	Chelsea Artha Pandiangan & Eny Ratnasari (2023) – Government Public Relations	Explaining the role of information transparency of the Public Relations of the	Qualitative descriptive; interviews, observations, literature studies	Open and honest communication can reduce public suspicion and prevent social tension	Emphasizing the importance of transparency in public relations communication in building

	and Information Transparency	Magelang City Government				harmonious relationships
3	Cahaya Ramadhani & Edy Sudaryanto (2022) – Public Relations Communication Strategy through Instagram TMII Information Museum	Knowing the PR communication strategy through social media to support public interactivity	Descriptive qualitative; Case Studies, Observations, Interviews, Documentation	Effective push, pull, and pass strategies reach a wide audience and respond to conflict issues in an adaptive manner		Social media as an important PR tool for two-way communication and conflict mitigation
4	Tesa Aulia Award (2022) – Public Relations Management Strategy in Conflict Resolution in Tribunnews Online Media	Knowing the PR management strategy in resolving internal and external conflicts in online media	Descriptive qualitative; informal interviews with relevant informants	Public Relations Management has several stages of strategy to resolve internal and external conflicts		Understanding the importance of Public Relations communication strategies in handling conflicts in the digital media era
5	Natasha Valencia Magrie Loing, et al. (2021) – Public Relations Strategy in Handling the Crisis of PT. Air Manado	Analyzing the public relations strategy of PT. Air Manado in handling the crisis of community complaints due to the disruption of clean water supply	Qualitative; Principles of Cutlip & Centre's Public Relations Strategy: Fact Finding, Action & Communication, Evaluating	4 PT. Air Manado uses all four model principles, each with advantages and disadvantages		The importance of a systematic and communicative public relations strategy in a public service crisis situation

Source: Processed Researcher (2025)

## RESEARCH METHODS

This research used a constructivist-critical paradigm that emphasizes a holistic and critical understanding of social phenomena in the structure, values, and dynamics of power in society (Creswell, 2014). The approach used is a qualitative approach with a qualitative descriptive type. The research method uses descriptive case studies, as stated by Yin (2018) that case studies are empirical investigations that examine contemporary phenomena in a real-life context.

The location of the research is *PT Satria Bahana Sarana* in Tanjung Enim, South Sumatra, with a research period of November 2025 until completion. Resource persons were selected using purposive sampling techniques. The research resource persons consisted of eight informants as presented in Table 2.

**Table 2. List of Research Informants**

Yes	Resource Persons	Quantity
1	Public Relations Staff of <i>PT Satria Bahana Sarana</i>	2
2	Company Management	2
3	Local Community Representatives	2
4	Other Related Parties (Police and NGOs/CSOs)	2
<b>Total</b>		<b>8</b>

Source: Processed Researcher (2025)

Data collection techniques include in-depth interviews with unstructured planned techniques, direct observation of Public Relations activities in interactions with the community, as well as documentation in the form of activity archives, CSR reports, photos of activities, and internal policy documents. Data analysis is carried out through data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawn, as stated by Lexy (2012).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### *Factors Causing Social Conflict at PT Satria Bahana Sarana*

Based on the results of interviews with various informants, social conflicts that occur between PT SBS and the community generally do not occur in the form of major conflicts such as demonstrations, but more often in the form of minor conflicts that are situational. The results of the study show seven factors that cause conflict as presented in Table 3.

**Table 3. Factors Causing Social Conflict at PT SBS**

Yes	Causal Factors	Description
1	Lack of Effective Communication (Miscommunication)	Optimal communication leads to misunderstandings regarding company policies and labor recruitment issues
2	Difference of Interest	The company has operational policies and restrictions that are not always in line with the needs and expectations of the community
3	High Public Expectations	Public expectations for social assistance, employment opportunities, and development contributions that exceed the capacity of the company
4	Lack of Understanding of the Company's Role	The public has not fully understood PT SBS's position as a contractor that has limited authority related to the parent company's policy
5	Historical Factors	Old problems that have not been fully resolved (territory, IUP, river water) have the potential to trigger new conflicts

6	Uneven Distribution of Information	Company information often only reaches the village government and is not conveyed directly to the entire community
7	Delayed Response	Conflicts tend to only be responded to after they surface, so communication is still reactive

Source: Interview Data, Processed Researcher (2026)

The factors causing conflicts at *PT SBS* are dominated by communication aspects that are not optimal. As conveyed by Erbi Saputra from the NGO Garda Prabowo, "The cause is actually miscommunication there. SBS is only as a contractor, all of that has been handed over by PTBA. But even though he has become a contractor, what the public sees is still SBS at a glance." This confirms the view of Pace and Faules (2005) that ineffective communication in an organization can create misunderstandings that trigger conflict.

### ***The Role and Function of PT SBS Public Relations in Facing Conflicts***

Based on the results of the research, *PT SBS* Public Relations has six interrelated strategic roles in managing social conflicts: (1) Public Relations as a communication bridge between company management and external society; (2) Public Relations as a conflict mediator who takes a dialogical and deliberative approach; (3) Public Relations as an information manager who clarifies and validates emerging issues; (4) Public Relations as the implementer of persuasive communication that builds emotional closeness before discussing the core of the problem; (5) Public Relations as the implementer of preventive communication to prevent the emergence of conflicts; and (6) Public Relations as a support for the company's operational stability.

Mr. Junaidi, as the Public Relations and CSR Staff of *PT SBS*, explained: "The role of Public Relations at *PT SBS* is as a bridge, a communication connector between the company's management and the outside community, also including for the company's own internal affairs." This is in line with Cutlip, Center, and Broom (2006) who stated that Public Relations is a management function that builds and maintains a mutually beneficial relationship between the organization and the public.

### ***Supporting and Inhibiting Factors for the Role of Public Relations at PT SBS***

Table 4 summarizes the supporting and inhibiting factors in the implementation of *PT SBS*'s Public Relations role.

**Table 4. Supporting and Inhibiting Factors of PT SBS's Public Relations Role**

<b>Yes</b>	<b>Categories</b>	<b>Description</b>
1	Support: Management Support	Management provides full support including policies, resources, and direct involvement in PR activities
2	Supporters: SOPs and Work Guidelines	The company has guidelines, SOPs, and work instructions that refer to ISO 9001, 14001, and 45001 as a reference for handling conflicts
3	Supporters: Persuasive Communication	A flexible and persuasive approach is able to create a conducive atmosphere in conflict resolution
4	Supporter: Public Relations Responsiveness	Public relations are considered very responsive (24-hour accessibility) in responding to public complaints via WhatsApp and phone
5	Supporters: CSR and Comdev Programs	A sustainable CSR and Community Development (Comdev) program strengthens public trust in the company
6	Inhibitors: Organizational Hierarchy	The decision-making process that must go through the hierarchy causes the response to conflict to be slower
7	Inhibitors: Internal Coordination	Internal coordination that is not yet optimal causes simple problems to become more complex
8	Inhibitors: Uneven Information	Information often only reaches the village government without being conveyed directly to the community
9	Inhibitors: High Expectations	Public expectations that are too high exceed the company's capacity have the potential to cause dissatisfaction
10	Inhibitors: Operational Limitations	Technical obstacles such as transportation hinder the direct mediation process in the field

Source: Interview Data, Processed Researcher (2026)

#### ***Application of Five Conflict Management Styles Based on the Thomas-Kilmann Model***

The results of the study show that PT SBS Public Relations applies the five conflict management styles dynamically, adjusted to the characteristics and urgency of each conflict situation.

First, the accommodative style is applied by prioritizing the interests of the community to maintain long-term relationships and social harmony. This approach is effective in low-intensity conflicts. Mr. Anggi from the local community said that "companies do not always give in, but are more likely to be open and flexible in finding solutions." This is in accordance with the Thomas-Kilmann theory principle that accommodating is effective when the relationship is more important than the issue at hand.

Second, avoidance is applied when the issue is not urgent or the risk of confrontation is high. Public relations do not necessarily bring every conflict to the management level, but rather seeks to resolve it first at the field level. Aiptu Amriyanto from the police confirmed that "during

my time here, conflicts such as demonstrations have not existed until now." This condition reflects the success of the strategy to reduce the escalation of conflict.

Third, collaborative styles are applied through flexible communication that combines formal and informal approaches. Public relations use a variety of communication media WhatsApp, telephone, face-to-face meetings, audiences to build cooperation with the community. Mr. Anggi confirmed that "there is always a good meeting point, a win-win solution between the company and the community."

Fourth, the compromise style is applied to reach mutual agreement through mutual concessions. PT SBS Public Relations implements the Balanced Scorecard (BSC) system with Key Performance Indicators (KPI) as a measurement tool for conflict management. Aiptu Amriyanto stated that the company's approach "is right but not optimal, because it adjusts the company's condition because not all people's wishes must be fulfilled."

Fifth, competitive style is applied by emphasizing firmness in decision-making according to organizational procedures and structures. Mr. Junaidi explained that the indicator of success in conflict management is when "there are no more conflicts, no demands, no uproar, and relations with the community return to the way they were."

Table 5 summarizes the application of the five conflict management styles by PT SBS Public Relations.

**Table 5. Application of the Five Styles of Thomas-Kilmann Conflict by Public Relations of PT SBS**

Yes	Conflict Style	Application	Implementation Context
1	Accommodating	Early mediation, persuasive communication, structured coordination, preventive measures	Low-intensity conflicts; mild misunderstandings; Maintaining a long-term relationship
2	Dodge	Settlement at the field level without escalation to management; Collect information before acting	The issue is not yet urgent; high risk of confrontation; It takes time to set up mediation
3	Collaborative	Multi-media communication (WA, face-to-face, audience); MSME training programs; Evaluation with stakeholders	Long-term solution; looking for a win-win solution; Building trust
4	Compromise	Identification and validation of information; persuasive mediation; use of BSC/KPI as performance indicators	Balanced interests; requires concessions from both parties; Settlement without damaging the relationship
5	Competitive	Rigor in the procedure; clear organizational structure; competence and preparation of the Public Relations team	The interests of the company are critical; the need for firm decisions; significant impact on operations

Source: Interview Data, Processed Researcher (2026)

## ***Discussion***

The findings of this study confirm the relevance of Thomas-Kilmann's theory in the context of managing social conflicts of mining companies. PT SBS Public Relations does not apply one style of conflict rigidly, but dynamically chooses strategies that are appropriate to the context. This is in line with the view of Wirawan (2010) that effective conflict management requires strategic flexibility.

The role of Public Relations as a mediator was confirmed by the police who stated that Public Relations plays a role in bridging the interests of the community with the company. These findings support the proposition of Cutlip, Center, and Broom (2006) that PR is a strategic management function, not just a technical function. The application of symmetrical two-way communication (Grunig & Hunt, 1984) is evident through the practice of mediation that results in a win-win solution.

The biggest challenge found was the involvement of Public Relations since the beginning of the conflict. As Erbi Saputra said, "Public Relations is usually like a stepchild, so Public Relations must coordinate again inward after chaos." This condition shows the need for a structural repositioning of Public Relations in order to have faster decision-making authority. These findings are in line with Dozier and Broom (1995) on the importance of Communication Manager Roles who have access to strategic decision-making.

The CSR program run by PT SBS has proven to be an important supporting factor in building social legitimacy (Suchman, 1995). Various programs such as MSME training, catfish farming, youth organization empowerment, and long-term community development have succeeded in building community trust. This confirms the view that communication strategies built on local values and culture can strengthen the relationship between companies and communities (Sha, 2006; Oliveira, 2013).

## **CONCLUSION**

This study concludes that social conflicts between PT SBS and the local community are generally situational with relatively low intensity, triggered by main factors, namely lack of effective communication (miscommunication), differences in interests, high public expectations, lack of public understanding of the company's role as a contractor, historical factors, uneven distribution of information, and delay in the company's response. *PT SBS* Public Relations plays a strategic role as a communication bridge, conflict mediator, information manager, persuasive and preventive communication implementer, and supporter of operational stability through the application of the five Thomas-Kilmann conflict management styles dynamically and contextually. Supporting factors include strong management support, clear ISO-based SOPs, persuasive and flexible communication approaches, high public relations responsiveness, and sustainable CSR and community development programs; Meanwhile, the main inhibiting factors are slow decision-making due to organizational hierarchy, internal coordination that is not optimal, and the distribution of information that does not reach directly to the community. To increase the effectiveness of conflict management, it is recommended that companies involve Public Relations from the early stages of the conflict with broader decision-making authority, strengthen preventive communication through regular socialization and direct dialogue forums to the public, develop flexible conflict resolution strategies according to the context, increase the capacity of the Public Relations team through public

relations training and certification, and ensure every program and information of the company It is really conveyed to all levels of society, not only at the village government level.

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