

Silent Amid Crisis: The Failure to Articulate Climate Change in Local Government Social Media Communication in Bengkulu City

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Abstract

Local government levels also need to respond in the various spheres touched by climate change. Local government agencies (OPD) social media profiles have strategic value for the communication of the public, education and information dissemination, and awareness of the climate danger and adaptive potential. The research analyzes the communication, and the lack thereof, of climate change within the social media of OPD of Bengkulu City, which being a coastal area, faces the most immediate threats of climate change— flooding, coastal abrasion, and extreme weather. Using a mixed-method approach, the study examines Instagram content of six climate relevant OPD through post frequency, content categorization and framing analysis. OPD accounts communication is very often, but climate change is almost never described as a public issue. There is a lot of communication in the ceremonial and administrative style, and climate adaptive actions, like the planting of trees and management of the coastal area, are described as simple and calendarized activities, and not as actions addressing climate danger. The practice of climate change is describing reality, not as a constructed public issue. Community forums in each municipality offered participants an opportunity to weigh in on potential solutions relevant to each of the defined priority themes for the unconference. Due to time constraints, it was not possible to address every priority theme in detail, although some were able to address more than one theme. Each municipality offered an opportunity for participants to identify issues for potential solutions.

Keywords: Climate Communication, Local Government, Social Media, Framing, Climate Change Adaptation, Institutional Silence, Bengkulu City

INTRODUCTION

The climate crisis is one of the most pressing threats to modern society. The ecological and social systems that comprise the world are being affected by the increases in the frequency of extreme weather events, rising global temperatures, and changes in rainfall patterns. Recent documents from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), emphasize that the most affected by the risks of climate change are low-lying coastal and island developing nations (IDN) due to sea-level rise, coastal erosion, and the decline

of coastal ecosystems (IPCC, 2021; IPCC, 2023). Under these circumstances, climate change cannot be examined as an issue of the environment, but rather the issue of developing/development with a social, economic, and a political governance dimension.

Coastal regions in Indonesia face the most serious effects of climate change. Erosion, tidal flooding, and seawater intrusion are all damaging features of the region's geography that result in physical damages. A loss of livelihoods, increased health risks, and a declining socioeconomic resilience of the local communities are all direct effects of this. Marfai and King, 2020 and Handayani et. Al, 2019 document these issues. Vulnerability disparities among social groups and the degradation of infrastructure are also worsening due to climate change. This is particularly true for communities that naturally resource coastal ecosystems.

The city of Bengkulu has been experiencing the most significant impacts of climate change along with the rest of the coastal areas of the city. With the Indian Ocean to its south, the city has dense settlements along the coast, with its economy reliant on both the sea and tourism. Thus, the city is at risk of coastal erosion and rising tides. Given these circumstances, the local government has the most important role to play in formulating and executing mitigation and adaptation strategies to manage the impacts of climate change. However, the literature is clear that the adaptation policy frameworks do not only hinge on the technical and policy/regulatory aspects, but, in large part, on the effectiveness of the communication of the climate risks to the people (Nurhidayah & McIlgorm, 2019).

The advancement of the digital communication ecosystem has greatly influenced the methods of communication used by local governments; social media has become a critical tool. The government can provide information using digital platforms which are timely, visual, and interactive, and while also allowing two-way communication with citizens. The importance of social media is evident in the context of climate change. Public communication through social media helps shape the climate awareness, risk perception, and overall preparedness of the public (Nerlich et al., 2020; Gustafson & Rice, 2020). The way local governments approach the issue of climate change is highly influential on how the public perceives the urgency of the situation and the steps taken toward adaptation. Is the approach ceremonial, educational, technical, or risk focused?

While the strategic function of digital public communication is gaining traction, studies indicate that local government communication still tends to underprioritize the attention given to climate change. Previous literature suggests that climate change narratives are, at best, inconsistent and sporadic, and are deprioritized compared to other development issues that are more politically and temporally urgent (Lee et al., 2018; Hase et al., 2021). In Indonesia, although there are studies that look at how social media is used by regional government agencies (OPD) to narrate climate change, these studies

are few in number and, at least in the case of coastal cities with high vulnerability like Bengkulu, are non-existent. This gap, at the very least, provides a basis for the present research in establishing the scope of climate change in the digital public communication of the OPDs and the ways in which the framing patterns may reflect (or, conversely, may not reflect) the climate risk of the region.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The institutional actor's ability to shape issue salience is crucial to understanding the social construction of social problems. While the actors may adjust the scope of understanding by influencing the response of the public to social problems, the theorization of issue framing and social problems may focus on the construction of the social problem without framing scope response. The setting of the problem, theorization, and construction of social problems can focus on the setting of the contextual scope of the problems being analyzed. From the various perspectives, in social problems and public communication, social problems, and climate change, the public communication of local government is problem setting. In the local government climate change communication, the problem-setting communication influences the climate change communication problem. The social construct of climate change is also the social problem of climate change. In climate change communication, and the social climate change problem, the setting of social problems is also the construction of social problems. The lack of problem-setting communication to influence the public's perception of urgency negatively can also set social problems and construct social problems.

The interlinking of agenda setting and issue construction is vital for the understanding of the communication process. In this case, the framing theory offers insight into how the government construes the reality of climate change and the language, images, and stories used. Framing theory explains how the highlighting of distinct components of the issue, while ignoring others, guides the audience to understanding the issue, its attribution, consequences, and the solution, or the lack thereof (Wijaya et al., 2024; O'Callaghan et al., 2025). In climate communication, the threat framing is often overused to instill fear and powerlessness, while the less used framing, which situates climate change with transcendental social issues and collective action, tends to provide the public with the agency to act positively (Karacaoğlu & Akbaba, 2024; Enjolras, 2024). Framing operates, defined and constrained as it may be, both as an apparatus of social meaning and as a strategy of communication.

The principles of risk communication aid in understanding the impact of framing with regards to climate change. Information on climate threats should pay attention to trust, uncertainty, and the ability of the audience to act. With regards to climate change, one-way technical communication has been the least effective in changing attitudes and behaviors. In contrast, approaches

that are dialogical, contextual and relevant to the everyday experiences of the local communities, promote preparedness and active participation (Acosta et al., 2023; Setiawan & Mihardja, 2024). For example, in the regions where the climate crisis has direct implications and are clear to the population in the form of tidal floods, coastal erosion, or disruption of means of livelihoods, the importance of risk communication is amplified.

With social media, the simultaneous applications of agenda setting, framing and risk communication are expanded. Digital tools give local authorities the ability to not only share information, but also to track feedback and facilitate interactive communication. Still, the opportunity social media provides is contingent on the level of social media management as an institution. Social media governance theory gives primacy to self-governance, communication ethics, and the organizational ability to manage the digital information flows responsibly and adaptively (Lestaluhu et al., 2023; Gunawan, 2024). The absence of sufficient governance means that the public communication is at risk of becoming, at best, symbolic or a mere reproduction of the same ceremonies and tell the audience nothing.

Numerous scholars observe that while communicating climate changes on the local level has improved, it still suffers from, among other issues, a lack of institutional prioritization and the reduced capacity of government account managers (Calista & Yenni, 2023; Sukmana et al., 2025). There is an evident imbalance between the critical environmental risk of coastal regions and the volume of climate narratives present in government digital public communications. Thus, given the relative scarcity of climate change doctrine in digital public spaces, it is pertinent to analyze local government social media governance to identify and understand the contribution of the articulation of agenda-setting, framing, and risk communication to climate resilience at the local level.

METHODOLOGY

The research analyzes the communication process regarding climate change on social media by local governments using a mixed-method approach, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative techniques. The study concentrates on the climate change governance-related Instagram posts of six Regional Government Organizations (OPD) in Bengkulu City: the Regional Development Planning Agency (Bappeda), the Regional Disaster Management Agency (BPBD), the Environmental Agency (DLH), the Communications, Informatics, and Encryption Agency (Kominfo), and the Fisheries (DKP) and the Food Security and Agriculture Agency (Dispangper). Posts from February to November 2025 were collected and analyzed to determine the level of activity and visibility of issues. Given the significant number of posts and several related programs, August 2025 was selected for comprehensive

analysis, and posts were systematically documented for coding as individual units of analysis.

During the quantitative phase, the categorization of posts fell into five content types: ceremonial content, administration, or public information service, public education, environment or ecology, and climate change narratives (latent climate change). For the qualitative phase, the method used was framing analysis, which examines the narratives around climate change in the agency's captions. The five types of framing used were ceremonial, education, climate risk mitigation/adaptation, programmatic/technical, and neutral. To exemplify the dominant framing, the agency's two leading captions were the subject of deep analysis. For this study, the synthesis of frequency-based findings and narrative analysis identified the discrepancies between posting priorities, genuine environmental practices, and the articulation of climate change as a risk to the public in the communication of local governments.

RESULTS

From the available data regarding the distribution of the number of posts by government agencies (OPD) up to the year 2025 (See Table 1), all the OPD's post engagements indicate a similar level of activity with their Instagram accounts. Even though there were varied instances of posting among the OPD's, there is a clear indication that social media posting has been ingrained into the local government communication process. The Environmental Agency (DLH) has been noted as the OPD with the highest number of posts for the majority of the observation period, followed by Bappeda and Kominfo. BPBD has a moderate level of activity, while DKP and Dispangper have been noted to have a positive spike in activity post mid-year. This trend shows that OPD administrators have the ability to and have built a habit of content creation. Consequently, the absence of certain content, including climate change, cannot be reasonably justified by either a lack of communication or a low level of activity. Thus, the social media handles of the OPD can be viewed as a platform for representation of the institution, and the communication priorities of the represented institution as opposed to operational constraints.

When evaluating the content of posts in August 2025 (see Table 2), it is clear that OPD content can be divided into five categories: ceremonial content, administrative/information services, public education, environment/ecology, and narratives on (latent) climate change. These categories show even distribution patterns across OPDs, although the proportions differ. Ceremonial content is the most widespread category across almost all OPDs. This includes documentation of flag ceremonies, meetings, celebrations of national holidays, inter-unit competitions, working visits, and activities of regional leaders. For OPDs such as Kominfo and Bappeda, ceremonial content even represents more

than 50% of total posts in August. This overwhelming dominance implies that OPD Instagram accounts serve more as a reporting mechanism for bureaucratic activities and the symbolic legalism of the institution rather than as channels for strategic issue advocacy and public education.

Tabel 1. Distribution of Government Agencies' Posts by Month in 2025

Month	Government Agency (OPD)					
	Bappeda	BPBD	DLH	Kominfo	DKP	Dispangper
February	44	11	61	49	-	-
March	35	13	64	27	-	-
April	38	17	42	27	-	-
May	54	37	45	41	-	29
June	15	12	66	31	-	17
July	29	20	86	32	9	37
August	38	22	52	41	6	26
September	27	13	80	36	17	19
October	33	11	60	38	31	11
November	29	32	63	38	18	9

Source : Instagram Account of Government Agencies, 2025

The high proportion of ceremonial content also points to the logic of presence and institutional visibility that pervades the communication of government agencies. Social media functions as a window dressing of ritualistic functions where the presence of the officials, engagement in the official activities, and the performing of the organizational routines provide the primary messages for the audience. In this type of communication, substantive issue like climate change, get relegated to the background to meet the needs of showcasing vertical hierarchy, the organizational structure and the performing of the bureaucratic routine.

Beside ceremonial content, the administrative or information service category also appears quite prominently, in government agencies that perform planning and coordination functions, like Bappeda and BPBD. Such content usually entails announcements of activities, meeting agendas, coordination of activities among institutions, and schedules of other bureaucratic functions. Although this content is informative, it positions as the content of administrative and policy processes that are technocratic in nature and focused on the internal workings of the agencies, like meetings, some sort of verification, and a coordination matrix that ultimately do not serve to advance the public understanding of the situation and the problem of a strategic nature.

Therefore, even when such agencies perform the function of decision making, planning, and bureaucratic functions, the public lacks information regarding the policy, the direction, the scope, and the implications of the policy, including the environmental and climate change policies.

Tabel 2. Content categories of Government Agencies' Post for Agustus 2025

Month	Governemnt Agency (OPD)					
	Bappeda	BPBD	DLH	Kominfo	DKP	Dispangper
Ceremonies	12	4	11	28	1	5
Administrative	12	5	9	3	1	4
Education	1	6	3		-	4
Environment Ecology	1	3	23	4	3	4
Climate Change	12	4	6	6	1	9
	38	22	52	41	6	26

Source : Instagram Account of Government Agencies, 2025

Public educational materials are even more scarce. Educational materials, especially concerning disaster mitigation and outreach in the food sector, have been provided more consistently by the BPBD and Dispangper. In relation to other agencies, educational materials are rarely present, or are entirely absent. This shows that even when social media has the potential to educate the public, government agencies do not prioritize it, despite the problems at hand being highly relevant to people's lives. Additionally, when educational narratives do exist, they are predominately prescriptive and vague. These narratives appear to be more of an ethical or moral prompt, and lack detailed contextual explanations concerning the risk, cause and effect, relation to the local situation, etc. This indicates that public education does consist of anything more than peripheral activity or programming.

The DLH Instagram account has the most posts in the environmental and ecological category and frequently shares stories about environmental activities such as clean-ups, tree trimming, monitoring water quality, and managing waste. However, environmental activities seem to be conducted as part of regular operational activities, with no clarification of the activities as they relate to climate change, environmental issues, and long-term adaptation. The same pattern is evident in most of the other OPDs, and environmental activities are treated as routine technical activities, rather than as part of a climate-related narrative. Describing environmental activities as technical routines suggests a lower ecological value associated with the activity, as well

as a failure to acknowledge and leverage the value of social media as a space for environmental and climate education.

The storyline regarding climate change possibilities (latent climate change) becomes a category that has both possibilities and challenges (a double-edged sword) in this case. This category contains posts that are relevant to climate change mitigation/adaptation, but where climate change is not explicitly mentioned in the public framing of the regional government agencies (the OPD) communication. The GEMPALA activity is the most prominent example in this category and shows up in almost all OPD accounts under analysis. GEMPALA is a program of the Bengkulu City Government, which aims to plant 10,000 coconut trees in the Panjang Beach area, with the objectives of beautifying the tourist zone, greening the coastal zone, beach erosion control, and providing the community with a long-term economic value through the coconuts that will be harvested. GEMPALA, which took place on August 18, 2025, and involved all OPDs along with community participation as a part of the regional development plan.

The actions taken to plant and tend to coconut trees along coastlines are correlated to climate change adaptation efforts, especially building coastal resilience and reducing erosion. That said, the analysis shows a certain tendency in local government office posts to discuss these activities emphasizing a bottom-up participatory approach, support for emerging leaders in the region, and success in overall activity implementation. Little to no explanation is provided regarding climate risks, coastal vulnerability, or the long term adaptive purpose of the coconut tree planting activities.

Climate change, as seen within the context of GEMPALA, focuses more on the latent meanings that are integrated within the physical practices, rather than the climate change issues that are constructed narratively within the communicative public sphere. There are adaptive activities, but they are not seen, nor articulated as adaptive responses to the climate emergency. This describes the disconnect between climate change actions and climate change meaning, where local government social media climate change awareness advocacy potential remains untapped.

These findings align with the framing of the caption analyses of local government agency (OPD) social media posts. From the analysis of two captions per OPD, five primary framing patterns are identified: ceremonial, educational, mitigation/adaptation, technical/programmatic, and neutral. Here, GEMPALA is seen neither as an object of policy evaluation nor as a case study; instead, it is an example that helps explain the limited thinking within OPD administrators about the activities associated with climate change. The analyses show that ceremonial framing is the most pervasive, where, for example, tree planting events are framed as expressions of institutional sponsorship or collective action, privileging the presence of certain actors and symbols of success.

Educational framing is largely absent when it comes to government institutions such as BPBD and Dispanper, save for some mention of public awareness, sustainability, and long-term benefit. Still, these messages are mostly communicated normatively, with no mention of climate change as a structural risk. Cases of risk-based mitigation or adaptation framing are almost non-existent, with the only sporadic and underdeveloped examples found on DLH. On the other hand, technical or programmatic framing is evident in planning institutions like Bappeda, however, it ends at procedural descriptions with no mention of climate in the long-term. Descriptive, neutral framing is also present in captions that only factually describe the activity, without attempts to create meaning or the context around it.

In total, this study found that for all the diverse activities local government agencies (OPD) carry out that relate to climate change adaptation and mitigation, the activities seem to be more of a routine, participatory, or procedural exercise. Therefore, climate change exists mostly in the background either in practice or in meaning, while in local government public communications it is seldom constructed in the narratives.

DISCUSSION

The study shows that the degree to which an OPD engages with the public via social media platforms is not related to how often the public addresses climate change concerns. Over the period of observation, OPD's Instagram accounts were highly active. However, the majority of these activities were of a ceremonial and administrative nature, while posts related to climate change (if any) were infrequent and inconsistent. Such a situation shows that the main problem is not the absence of communication but rather the communication priorities the OPD has set.

Considering the agenda-setting theory, this describes how the content selection and its repetition influence the ordering of what is deemed important in the public space. When the agenda of the department is filled with appeals, meetings, work visits and other ceremonial activities, strategic matters like climate change are increasingly relegated to the periphery. That is to say, climate change is not ignored, but is subsumed by discourse that is deemed safer, more routine, and bureaucratically more comfortable.

The amount of ceremonial type posts on OPD social media accounts show how social media is used for legitimization of institutional presence. These posts indicate the organization's existence, adherence to the leadership, and inclusion to the official local governance plan. Here, social media is used to highlight the performance of the bureaucracy, and not to solve social issues. This is how the social media potential as a strategic and educational communication tool is squandered.

The situation is made worse by the geography of the city of Bengkulu and the resultant impacts of climate change. Here, the reality of risk is the coastal threats of abrasion, tidal flooding, and bad weather which all require the communication of the risk to be ongoing. In this case, the absence of the local government on the issue of climate change in the public space is interpreted by the public to mean that climate change is not a serious problem in the area. The less something is discussed in public, the less urgent it is perceived to be.

Theoretically speaking, ceremonial framing is used to describe the dominant representation of activities directly related to climate change. The GEMPALA program is, for instance, predominantly framed as collective participation and support for regional leaders and/or the successful accomplishment of activities. Such framing tends to stress the symbolism and the actors involved, while the ecological context and climate change risks go unmentioned. In this way, climate change is relegated from a structural concern to merely the context of the activities.

The ceremonial framing has implications for the depoliticization of climate action in the realm of public communication. When environmental actions are presented as a series of routine events, the political and strategic dimensions of climate change tend to be reduced. Issues regarding regional vulnerability, disparity of impacts, and long-term policy responsibilities do not surface. As a result, the public is not encouraged to understand climate change as a collective issue that requires cross-sectoral and long-term engagement.

Aside from ceremonial framing, I found technical and administrative framing, which is particularly evident in the government agencies with planning and coordination responsibilities. In this case, technical framing occurs when the environmental activities are broken down into steps, such as activity steps, technical preparation steps, or inter-agency coordination. Even though it demonstrates the flow of an institutional process, technical framing is limited to process and stops without articulating the more broad or encompassing climate policy visions and/or adaptation. This means the public communication narrative undertaken by government agencies is devoid of a complete articulation of their strategic planning functions.

Educational framing, while present, is only superficially and barely normatively articulated. The educational messages provided generally are of moral persuasion or of reflective summary of the concept of sustainability and the pleas for the future generations. This, while valuable in its own right, is not sufficient to portray climate change as a structural phenomenon with definable and identifiable consequences. Without an articulation of the effect and the contextual illustration, the educational process risks the absence of transformative potential.

In the context of environmental/risk communication, there is a gap between climate action and meaning making around the climate. Government

agencies do many activities relevant to adaptation and mitigation. However, these activities are seldom framed as responses to climate change. Environmental activities are more often framed as operational obligations, or annual cycles, rather than climate crisis activities. Consequently, the public is often unaware of the risks as well as the available adaptation strategies.

BPBD is relatively more consistent when it comes to delivering educational messages about disaster mitigation, in particular, through socialization and simulation activities. However, even in this case, the regional government agency does not often make the connection between disaster events and climate change as a broader risk factor. This illustrates the lack of integration of risk communication into a more holistic climate change context. Risk is framed as an event, not as a process that unfolds over time and is linked to climate change.

An example of silencing in relation to narrative construction on the climate may be the growing urgency of environmental activities that remain unaccompanied by new climate narratives. Engaging the theory of institutions, the pattern of communication from the relevant government institutions may be informed by a bureaucracy that values structural compliance, organizational stability, and the routine of administration. In such a context, climate change, as a cross-cutting challenge that needs critical thinking and a consideration of the long term, becomes difficult to articulate within existing communication frameworks.

It is, however, possible that the silence, in this case, is the absence of narratives that align the activities to the risks and collective responsibility of the 'act' climate change. Climate change is an unfinished business, as it is being acted on, only that it is not being communicated in the public domain. The absence of such discourse narrows the scope within which the public may come to appreciate the phenomenon of climate change as a problem that calls for their collective action.

Consequently, local governments' public communication has not yet served as an important means of raising climate change awareness. Local government agencies' social media, instead of promoting the critical examination of social/environmental issues, too frequently reproduces the social/administrative dead weight of bureaucracy. Within the scope of local climate governance, this state of affairs is likely to diminish community readiness and thwart the development of a constituency for public support of enduring adaptive policy proposals.

This study maintains that, in local climate change communication, the challenges are not the absence of programs or activities, but how these are perceived and communicated. The need to shift public communication practices from a bureaucratic or ceremonial reporting approach to one that employs risk and adaptation narratives is paramount in order to enhance climate governance. In any case, failing to change the narratives will diminish

the strategic importance of the actions taken to address the climate crisis from the public's perspective.

CONCLUSION

This research evaluates the role of climate change in the public communication of local governments through content and framing analysis of the Instagram accounts of six regional government agencies in Bengkulu City. It finds that although these agencies are fairly active in content generation, climate change communication is very low on their agenda. Content is mostly ceremonial and administrative. Reports on environmental and disaster-related activities hardly ever mention the climate change risk, or plans for long-term adaptations. The GEMPALA program is the best example of activities with latent climate change narratives, where actions are taken, but are not presented as a response to the climate emergency.

Ceremonial framing prevails in the analysis. There is little to no risk framing that aims to educate the audience, and almost no framing on climate mitigation or adaptation. The absence of these types of framing is explained as a result of imbalances in communication agenda priorities, the framing of issues as depoliticized, and the lack of responsiveness within local government. In general, this research demonstrates that the gap in local climate communication is not the absence of activities, but the absence of the word climate in the public communication of local governments.

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