

THE ROLE OF BAKUDAPA TUAGAMA IN ROAD INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT: A STUDY OF NENIARI GUNUNG VILLAGE, TANIWEL DISTRICT, WEST SERAM REGENCY

Mersye Heumase^{1a*}, Aholiab Watloly^{2b}, Pieter Jacob Pelupessy^{3c}, Jeffre EM Leiwakabessy^{4d}

¹ Master of Sociology, Universitas Pattimura

^aE-mail: mersyeheumase@gmail.com

(*) Corresponding Author

mersyeheumase@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of church advocacy in addressing social inequality related to road infrastructure development in Neniari Gunung Village, a disadvantaged area in West Seram Regency, Indonesia. While prior studies on faith-based advocacy predominantly focus on national policy influence or urban civil society movements, limited research explores how church actors operate as informal governance institutions within rural, infrastructure-deprived contexts in Eastern Indonesia. Addressing this gap, this qualitative case study draws on in-depth interviews, observation, and document analysis. The findings indicate that inadequate road infrastructure has significantly constrained education, healthcare access, and local economic activities, reinforcing structural inequality. Amid weak government accountability and alleged budget mismanagement, the church functioned not merely as a moral voice but as a mediating governance actor fostering collective action and participatory claims-making. Positioned within literature on civil society and local governance, this study contributes theoretically by conceptualizing church advocacy as faith-based governance practice that bridges accountability deficits at the village level. However, the study is limited to a single case and does not measure long-term policy outcomes or comparative regional variation.

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INTRODUCTION

Advocacy is a strategic action to influence public policy through organized, evidence-based engagement (Bettencourt & Marchio, 2023; Cammett, 2020). It is particularly relevant in contexts of inequality and governance failure, where public policies often diverge from citizens' needs (Clarke & Jennings, 2019). Rather than merely expressing aspirations, advocacy seeks concrete institutional responses and measurable accountability. It involves mobilizing citizens, framing issues strategically, and pressing decision-makers to act responsibly. In this sense, advocacy functions as both a political instrument and a mechanism of democratic correction.

Within religious institutions, the church holds a distinct moral and social position (Cline, 2021). Beyond its spiritual function, it bears ethical responsibility to promote justice and solidarity in society (Coleman et al., 2023). Church advocacy refers to organized efforts, carried out institutionally or collectively, to defend marginalized groups and pursue social transformation grounded in theological commitments (Fox, 2015; Goodfellow, 2017). This framing clarifies the church not only as a moral voice but also as a potential governance actor in local contexts. Consequently, church engagement may extend beyond charity toward structured accountability initiatives.

Development challenges in Indonesia's archipelagic regions, particularly Maluku, remain structurally embedded (Grillos, 2017; Higgins et al., 2024). Limited infrastructure, restricted access to education and healthcare, and weak institutional capacity contribute to persistent inequality (Kerstetter & others, 2023). Development entails structural transformation and improved collective capacity (Knodel et al., 2025), in which physical infrastructure plays a foundational role (Lewis, 2019). Without adequate roads, access to markets and public services is severely constrained (Mansuri & Rao, 2016). Unequal infrastructure deepens disparities in welfare and opportunity (Massaro, 2021), despite the state's responsibility to ensure equitable provision (Njirū, 2024). These structural constraints are evident in Indonesia's 3T regions (Roberts & others, 2021), including Neniari Gunung Village in West Seram (Schliesser, 2023)

Empirically, field observations and interviews in Neniari Gunung Village reveal failed road infrastructure development despite a 2022 regional budget allocation of approximately IDR 10 billion. The road remains largely gravel and soil, accompanied by allegations of budget mismanagement and no decisive government follow-up. The consequences are visible across sectors of daily life. In education, limited classrooms and unfinished junior high school facilities restrict learning quality and student progression. In healthcare, a completed sub-health center remains non-operational, while poor road access limits referrals. Economically, high transportation costs reduce competitiveness and widen disparities with better-connected regions.

Although scholarship discusses advocacy, religion, and development separately, few studies explicitly examine how church-based advocacy operates at the village level to address infrastructure injustice in remote 3T areas. This absence constitutes a clear research gap within rural governance and faith-based activism literature. Responding to local governance shortcomings, the church in Neniari Gunung Village engages in persuasive dialogue, community mobilization, and accountability claims-making. Therefore, this study investigates how church-led advocacy confronts infrastructure inequality and governance deficits in practice. By positioning the analysis at the intersection of faith-based activism and rural development accountability, the research contributes theoretically to understanding church advocacy as a form of informal governance engagement. It also offers practical insights for policymakers and religious institutions seeking inclusive and accountable development strategies.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design to examine the role of church advocacy in addressing social inequality related to road infrastructure development in Neniari Gunung Village, Taniwel District, West Seram Regency. The research was conducted over a six-month period, from January to June 2023, to allow sustained engagement with the community and institutional actors. A total of 18 informants participated in the study, consisting of church leaders, village officials, community members, teachers, health workers, and other stakeholders directly involved in or affected by the road infrastructure issue. The qualitative case study design enables an in-depth and contextualized understanding of advocacy processes, governance dynamics, and local development challenges within a disadvantaged rural setting.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, direct observation, and document analysis. Interviews were conducted semi-structurally to capture participants' experiences, perceptions, and strategies related to church advocacy and infrastructure inequality. Direct observation focused on the physical condition of road infrastructure, educational facilities, and health services in the village. Secondary data were obtained from official government documents, regional budget reports, development planning documents, and relevant media publications to support triangulation and strengthen data validity.

Informants were selected using purposive sampling based on their knowledge, experience, and involvement in advocacy or local development processes. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached, ensuring sufficient depth and variation of perspectives. Data analysis followed an interactive model involving data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing through systematic coding and thematic categorization. The analysis explored the relationship between church advocacy strategies, governance accountability, and social inequality. Ethical principles were upheld throughout the study, including informed consent, voluntary participation, and confidentiality of sensitive information.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study reveals that the issue of road infrastructure in Neniari Gunung Village is not merely a technical development problem, but a manifestation of broader social inequality and governance challenges. The findings indicate that limited government accountability and weak policy follow-up have intensified community hardship in education, healthcare, and economic activities. In this context, the church has emerged as a significant social actor, taking initiatives to advocate for justice and infrastructure improvement. The research findings highlight how church advocacy operates, influences community awareness, and encounters structural limitations within the local development system.

Forms and Strategies of Church Advocacy in Road Infrastructure Development

The findings show that the church in Neniari Gunung Village initiated its advocacy efforts in response to growing community frustration over the damaged and unfinished road infrastructure. Church leaders recognized that poor road conditions were directly affecting access to schools, healthcare services, and local markets. Through sermons, pastoral meetings, and internal church forums, the issue of infrastructure inequality was framed not only as a development concern but also as a matter of social justice and moral responsibility. This initial step marked the transformation of the church's role from a purely spiritual institution into an active social advocate.

In terms of strategy, the church employed persuasive and participatory approaches rather than confrontational methods. Church leaders facilitated community discussions to collect testimonies and document the real impacts of road damage on daily life. These forums encouraged residents to voice their concerns collectively and strengthened their confidence to demand accountability. The church also sought dialogue with village authorities and district representatives, emphasizing transparency and responsible use of public funds. By grounding its advocacy in moral arguments and community welfare, the church positioned itself as a mediator rather than an oppositional force.

Furthermore, the church built informal networks with educators, health workers, and community figures to broaden support for infrastructure improvement. This collaborative approach increased the legitimacy of advocacy efforts and demonstrated that the issue affected multiple sectors of village life. Although formal policy change had not yet been fully realized, the church's strategic engagement succeeded in elevating the issue to public attention and placing pressure on local authorities. These findings indicate that church advocacy in Neniari Gunung operates through moral persuasion, collective mobilization, and constructive engagement with governance actors.

The Impact of Church Advocacy on Social Awareness and Community Participation

The findings indicate that church advocacy has significantly increased social awareness among community members regarding their rights to equitable development. Prior to the advocacy initiatives, many residents perceived the damaged road infrastructure as an unavoidable condition due to the village's remote location. However, through continuous dialogue and moral encouragement from church leaders, the community began to understand that access to proper infrastructure is a fundamental right rather than a privilege. This shift in perception marked the emergence of critical awareness concerning governance accountability and public resource management.

In addition, church-led discussions fostered greater community participation in addressing development issues. Residents who were previously passive gradually became more engaged in meetings, collective forums, and communication with local authorities. The church provided a safe and trusted space where individuals could express concerns without fear of intimidation. As a result, participation was no longer limited to village elites but expanded to

include parents, farmers, youth, and women. This inclusive participation strengthened the collective voice of the village in advocating for infrastructure improvements.

Moreover, the advocacy process reinforced social solidarity and cohesion within the community. Shared experiences of hardship due to poor road conditions created a sense of common struggle, which was further nurtured through church gatherings and communal activities. Rather than generating conflict, advocacy efforts encouraged unity and mutual support. The church's role as a moral leader helped prevent polarization while promoting constructive engagement. These findings demonstrate that beyond influencing policy discourse, church advocacy has contributed to empowering the community socially and strengthening its internal resilience.

Limitations and Challenges of Church Advocacy in Influencing Policy Change

Despite its positive impact on community awareness and participation, church advocacy in Neniari Gunung Village faces significant structural challenges. One major obstacle lies in the bureaucratic and administrative system at the district level, where decision-making processes are often slow and lack transparency. Although dialogue has been initiated, concrete policy responses regarding the damaged road infrastructure remain limited. This situation reflects broader governance weaknesses, including insufficient oversight, weak accountability mechanisms, and limited political will to prioritize remote villages categorized as disadvantaged areas.

Another challenge concerns the limited institutional capacity of the church itself. While the church possesses moral authority and strong social legitimacy, it lacks formal political power and technical expertise in infrastructure planning and budget monitoring. Advocacy efforts largely rely on voluntary participation and internal resources, which restrict the scope and sustainability of actions. Furthermore, limited access to official documents and financial transparency makes it difficult for the church to substantiate allegations of fund mismanagement with comprehensive evidence.

These limitations affect the overall effectiveness of advocacy in producing immediate structural change. Although awareness and solidarity within the community have increased, tangible improvements in road infrastructure have yet to materialize. Nevertheless, the findings suggest that church advocacy plays a crucial role in maintaining public pressure and sustaining discourse on justice and accountability. While structural reform may require broader institutional collaboration, the church's engagement remains an essential foundation for long-term, inclusive, and equitable development in Neniari Gunung Village.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that church advocacy in Neniari Gunung Village reflects the conceptual understanding of advocacy as a strategic and persuasive effort to influence public policy and decision-making. Rather than adopting confrontational tactics, the church employed moral persuasion, community mobilization, and constructive dialogue to address the issue of road infrastructure inequality. This approach aligns with the theoretical perspective that advocacy seeks to transform attitudes, generate collective will, and influence governance processes through organized and systematic action. In this case, the church functioned not only as a spiritual institution but also as a civic actor filling the gap left by weak local governance (Siatan, 2024).

From a development perspective, the poor condition of road infrastructure illustrates how structural inequality limits a community's capacity to act and progress. Development is not merely about economic growth but about expanding opportunities and enhancing people's ability to access essential services such as education, healthcare, and markets. The damaged road in Neniari Gunung Village has constrained mobility, restricted service delivery, and hindered economic potential. Therefore, infrastructure inequality can be understood as a barrier to social transformation and human development. The church's advocacy highlights how local institutions can contribute to addressing such structural constraints when formal systems underperform (Tuhepary, 2025).

The study also reveals that advocacy efforts have strengthened social capital within the community. Increased awareness, participation, and solidarity indicate that the church has successfully mobilized collective agency. By

framing infrastructure issues as matters of justice and shared responsibility, the church fostered unity rather than division. This outcome suggests that faith-based advocacy can enhance community resilience and empowerment, particularly in disadvantaged rural areas. Social cohesion, in this context, becomes both a resource and an outcome of advocacy processes (von Sinner & Zeferino, 2025).

However, the limited policy response underscores the structural challenges inherent in influencing public infrastructure decisions. Without stronger institutional accountability mechanisms and political commitment from local authorities, advocacy alone may not immediately produce tangible infrastructure improvements. This finding emphasizes the importance of multi-actor collaboration involving government institutions, civil society, and religious organizations. While church advocacy has laid the foundation for participatory engagement and moral accountability, sustainable infrastructure development ultimately requires systemic governance reform and transparent public resource management (Wahyuni, 2022).

CONCLUSION

This study argues that church advocacy in Neniari Gunung Village should be understood not merely as community support activity, but as a form of informal governance intervention in contexts of accountability deficit. In situations where state-led infrastructure provision fails to deliver equitable outcomes, the church operates as a moral authority that translates theological values into collective claims-making and participatory pressure. Although road improvements remain limited, the advocacy process has redefined infrastructure access as a matter of rights rather than charity. This shift reflects a deeper transformation in local political consciousness and illustrates how faith-based legitimacy can compensate for weak formal institutions in disadvantaged regions.

The findings therefore offer a stronger theoretical implication: church advocacy functions as a mediating structure between marginalized citizens and fragmented local governance systems. By mobilizing social capital, moral legitimacy, and organizational networks, the church expands the arena of accountability beyond formal political institutions. This perspective reframes advocacy within rural development debates, positioning religious actors as embedded governance stakeholders rather than peripheral moral commentators. Such a framing strengthens theoretical discussions on civil society, subnational governance, and social justice in peripheral regions.

Future research should examine comparative cases across other 3T regions to assess whether similar advocacy patterns emerge in different socio-religious and political contexts. Longitudinal studies are also needed to evaluate the long-term policy and infrastructure outcomes of faith-based advocacy efforts. Quantitative or mixed-method approaches could further measure the extent to which church engagement influences budget transparency and development performance. Expanding the analytical scope in these directions would deepen understanding of religion's evolving role in local governance and infrastructure equity.

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