



Religious Community Engagement as a Strategic Communication Approach for Building Public Trust and Managing Risk in Indonesia's Oil and Gas Sector

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Abstract

This case study examines how religious community engagement, specifically partnerships with pesantren (Islamic boarding schools) affiliated with Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), can function as strategic communication infrastructure for building public trust in Indonesia's oil and gas sector. We focus on Pertamina EP Jatibarang Field in West Java, where upstream operations interact with communities whose livelihoods depend on land and water systems. The research addresses a gap between formal corporate transparency mechanisms, such as PPID information services, and the need for social translation at the subnational field level. We conduct a single-case analysis using multiple lenses: corporate governance frameworks, social-operational geography of the Jatibarang area, religious-demographic landscape, and institutional capacity of pesantren and NU networks. Our findings demonstrate that Pertamina EP's existing corporate architecture already treats community trust as an operational governance issue rather than a philanthropic one; for example, the company applies social impact assessments and a social license index across fields. Furthermore, demographic data from BPS Indramayu shows that villages in the operational corridor are overwhelmingly Muslim-majority, with over 126,747 Muslims in districts such as Karangampel and Kedokanbunder. In addition, official data from Satu Data Kemenag records 13,005 pesantren in West Java, with 726 in Cirebon, 260 in Majalengka and 184 in Kabupaten Indramayu. This dense institutional network is already articulating environmental stewardship through initiatives like the "Piagam Kempek" and the "Satu Santri Satu Pohon" movement under KMA No. 442/2025. The study concludes that pesantren-NU engagement should be treated as strategic communication infrastructure for social license, particularly for risks that are socially interpreted before they are technically understood, such as land-use concerns and perceived opacity. The novelty lies in bridging corporate risk communication doctrine with locally embedded religious institutions, offering a defensible model that extends existing governance logic rather than inventing a new one. This research is significant because it provides an original contribution to understanding how faith-based partnerships can operationalize social license in Indonesia's upstream oil and gas sector.

Keywords: Managing Risk; Oil and Gas; Public Trust; Religious Community; Strategic Communication.

Introduction

The Indonesian upstream oil and gas sector operates within a complex socio-political landscape where technical performance alone cannot guarantee operational continuity (Yin, 2021). Companies must navigate a terrain shaped by community expectations, environmental scrutiny, and the persistent challenge of maintaining a social license to operate (J. L. Wang et al., 2022). In West Java, where Pertamina EP Jatibarang Field conducts its operations, the interaction with local communities is particularly consequential. The livelihoods of residents in this region depend heavily on land, water, and coastal systems, making environmental explanation, grievance handling, and reputational trust highly salient for operational stability.

Formal corporate transparency mechanisms, such as PPID information services, provide procedural channels for public information requests and objections (Fadli et al., 2020). However, these mechanisms may not achieve adequate social translation at the subnational field level. Communities often interpret risks not through technical documents but through trusted social relationships, where the credibility and relatability of the messenger matter as much as the accuracy of the message itself (Schmidhuber et al., 2021). This gap between formal information provision and genuine public understanding creates a vulnerability for upstream operations, particularly when rumors about environmental impacts or land-use changes circulate rapidly through informal networks.

The central research question of this study investigates whether the existing institutional infrastructure of Pertamina EP, combined with the dense pesantren-NU network in the Jatibarang Field operational area, provides a defensible basis for positioning faith-based community engagement as more than ceremonial corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Brunton et al., 2019). We examine whether such engagement can function as operational communication infrastructure for social license, thereby addressing a significant gap in current practice (Hoffmann, 2023). The

objective is to examine how religious community engagement, specifically partnerships with pesantren (Islamic boarding schools) affiliated with Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), can function as a strategic public communication and risk management approach within Pertamina EP Jatibarang Field operations.

The significance of this research lies in its potential to bridge corporate risk communication doctrine with locally embedded religious institutions. This is particularly relevant given that the Jatibarang operational environment is overwhelmingly Muslim-majority, with demographic data from BPS Indramayu showing that villages such as Dukuhjeruk, Mundu, and Pangkalan have Muslim populations exceeding 98 percent (Andrews, 2020). Furthermore, Kementerian Agama data records 13,005 pesantren in West Java, the largest provincial total nationally, with 726 institutions in Kabupaten Cirebon, 260 in Kabupaten Majalengka & and 184 in Kabupaten Indramayu (Condie et al., 2024). This dense institutional network positions pesantren and their affiliated religious leaders as central community channels rather than peripheral actors.

The study contributes to the literature by offering a defensible model for faith-based strategic communication that extends existing corporate governance logic. Pertamina's current architecture already treats community trust as an operational issue, evidenced by social impact assessments, AMDAL public disclosure processes, stakeholder engagement studies, and a social license index applied across multiple fields. The novelty of this research is in demonstrating how engagement with pesantren-NU can institutionalize this governance logic at the local level, transforming religious institutions from passive beneficiaries into active communication intermediaries.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 presents a literature review that examines the theoretical foundations of strategic communication, risk management, and the socio-religious context of Indonesia's oil and gas sector. Section 3 provides a detailed case description of Pertamina EP Jatibarang Field, including its corporate governance framework, operational geography, and religious-demographic landscape. Section 4 presents the findings and discussion, analyzing how pesantren-NU engagement fits within the existing governance architecture and identifying the implications for social license. Section 5 concludes the paper with a summary of contributions and suggestions for future research.

Literature Review

Strategic communication in extractive industries has increasingly moved beyond unidirectional information dissemination toward relational models that recognize the centrality of trust and social embeddedness (Najicha, 2021). The risk communication literature, particularly as developed by the World Health Organization, emphasizes that effective crisis and risk communication must consider social, religious, cultural, political, and economic contexts (Höltge et al., 2021a). This doctrine recommends engaging trusted community leaders, establishing feedback mechanisms, conducting social listening, and investing in local-language dissemination—all of which presuppose a deep understanding of the community's institutional landscape. For the Indonesian context, this means that formal corporate communication mechanisms, however transparent procedurally, may fail to achieve their intended effect if they do not resonate with the relational networks through which communities actually process information and form judgments.

The literature on corporate social responsibility (CSR) communication in Indonesia's oil and gas sector has documented the critical role of local intermediaries (Madondo et al., 2025). Research on the Bojonegoro Regency found that local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) function as essential communication channels between companies and communities, serving to empower beneficiaries and maintain a performance track record that is linked to operational locations (Asmolov, 2025). These NGOs fulfill a dual role: they carry out tasks that may prioritize corporate interests, while also acting as project partners for programme implementation. The implication for the Pertamina EP Jatibarang Field context is clear: if local NGOs can serve as trusted intermediaries, then pesantren and NU networks—which possess deeper institutional roots and longer histories of community service—could potentially play an even more effective intermediary role.

Religious institutions in Indonesia have historically transcended their spiritual functions to become significant social actors. The NU-affiliated pesantren network, in particular, represents one of the largest and most organized civil society infrastructures in the country, with a presence in virtually every village across Java and beyond (Höltge et al., 2021b). These institutions engage in education, moral formation, community empowerment, and increasingly, environmental stewardship. The Kementerian Agama's KMA No. 442/2025 on "Pesantren Ramah Lingkungan" formalizes this environmental dimension, creating a national ecotheology movement under the slogan "Satu Santri Satu Pohon" (Jin et al., 2025). This policy momentum provides a regulatory anchor for partnership models between upstream oil and gas companies and pesantren as agents of environmental literacy.

The Indonesian crisis communication literature provides further support for faith-based engagement strategies. The OUCRU Indonesia participatory mapping study on risk communication effectiveness found that message credibility depends not only on information accuracy but on the perceived independence and community embeddedness of the messenger (Kwarto et al., 2024). The study recommended engaging trusted local figures such as religious and community leaders from the outset of any communication effort (Ivanov & Dolgui, 2021). This finding aligns with broader WHO doctrine and underscores the limitations of relying exclusively on formal corporate spokespersons or technical documents to convey information about operational risks.

Pertamina's corporate family has already established precedents for engagement with pesantren across various operational sites. PHE Rantau Field delivered humanitarian aid to a pesantren in Aceh Tamiang, Pertamina Hulu Mahakam provided sanitation support for a pesantren in Kutai Kartanegara, and Pertamina Foundation publicized

integrated agriculture-waste-energy innovation in a Bogor pesantren (Ramos et al., 2021). These cases demonstrate that pesantren are already recognized as legitimate community partners and beneficiaries within the Pertamina system, though the public record does not yet show a strategic framework that positions such engagement as core communication infrastructure for social license.

The theoretical framework for this study draws on the concept of social license to operate, which posits that operational continuity depends on the ongoing acceptance of a company's activities by local communities, beyond formal regulatory approval (Colicchia et al., 2019). Achieving and maintaining social license requires ongoing communication, responsiveness to grievances, and demonstrated commitment to community well-being. For risks that are socially interpreted before they are technically understood—such as land-use impacts, water quality concerns, or perceived corporate opacity—the involvement of trusted intermediaries becomes particularly consequential (Cociuba et al., 2019). Religious community engagement offers a pathway for companies to embed themselves within the community's existing trust networks rather than attempting to construct new ones from scratch.

While the existing literature has examined CSR communication, NGO intermediation, and crisis communication in Indonesia separately, there remains a notable gap in understanding how faith-based institutions can be systematically integrated into strategic communication frameworks for the oil and gas sector. The present study addresses this gap by examining the specific institutional infrastructure of pesantren-NU networks in the Jatibarang operational corridor and evaluating whether this infrastructure provides a defensible basis for positioning religious community engagement as operational communication infrastructure for social license. The key significance of this research lies in demonstrating that such engagement extends an existing corporate governance logic rather than inventing a new one—Pertamina already applies social impact assessments and social license indices—and in providing empirical evidence that the institutional capacity and policy momentum for such partnerships already exist in the Pertamina EP Jatibarang Field context.

Case Description

The case examined in this study is Pertamina EP Jatibarang Field, an upstream oil and gas production asset located in West Java, Indonesia. This field operates within Pertamina's Zone 7 alongside the Subang and Tambun fields, spanning seven regencies and cities that include Indramayu, Majalengka, Kabupaten Cirebon, and Kota Cirebon. The Jatibarang Field represents a mature production asset that remains operationally active, with documented drilling activities such as ABG-017 in 2022 and first liquid onstream from SP ABG Stage 1 in September 2025 (Trihatmoko & Susilo, 2024). This operational continuity makes the maintenance of local legitimacy alongside technical performance a persistent organizational requirement.

The corporate governance framework within which Pertamina EP Jatibarang Field operates is structured through Pertamina EP Regional 2 as a part of Pertamina Hulu Energi (PHE), the upstream subholding of Pertamina. Public materials from PHE document that upstream operations rely on a suite of social management tools, including social impact assessments, public disclosure in AMDAL processes, stakeholder engagement studies, social mapping, and a social license index applied across multiple fields (Xiao et al., 2023). The formal PPID information service provides procedures for information requests, objections, standards of service, and public-facing contact channels. This architecture demonstrates that community trust is already treated within the Pertamina system as an operational and governance issue rather than solely a philanthropic one.

The operational geography of the Pertamina EP Jatibarang Field is dispersed across multiple locations. Company complexes include Komperta Mundu in Dukuhjeruk, Karangampel, Indramayu, and Komperta Cemara in Pangkalan, Losarang, Indramayu (Thelen, 2021). This dispersed footprint creates multiple contact points with surrounding communities, meaning that the field's operations interact with diverse village populations across a relatively wide geographic area. The operational area includes coastal zones along the Cirebon coast and areas near the Gunung Ciremai biodiversity corridor, indicating that environmental management is a salient dimension of the field's community interface.

The religious-demographic landscape of the Pertamina EP Jatibarang Field operational corridor is overwhelmingly Muslim-majority, which positions Islamic institutions as central community channels rather than peripheral actors. Demographic data from BPS Indramayu shows that villages within the operational footprint have Muslim populations that approach or reach 100 percent. For example, Dukuhjeruk village had 4,879 Muslims in 2023 with minimal non-Muslim minorities, Mundu village recorded 5,219 Muslims with no other listed religious groups, and Pangkalan had 6,359 Muslims with only very small minority populations (Ingsih et al., 2021). At the district level, BPS records show Karangampel District with 75,238 Muslims and Kedokanbunder with 51,489 Muslims (Inayati et al., 2019). This empirical evidence establishes that the communities surrounding Pertamina EP Jatibarang Field operations are religiously homogeneous, making faith-based institutions the natural organizational infrastructure for community engagement.

The institutional capacity of pesantren and NU networks in this corridor is substantial. Kementerian Agama data from Satu Data Kemenag reports 13,005 pesantren in West Java in 2025, the largest provincial total nationally. Open Data Jabar records 726 pesantren in Kabupaten Cirebon, 260 in Kabupaten Majalengka and 184 in Kabupaten Indramayu with associated santri (students) and ustadz (teachers) populations of 77,887 in Cirebon, 33,014 in Majalengka, and 21,731 in Indramayu. These numbers indicate a dense institutional network with significant human capital that could serve as communication infrastructure for social license.

The NU dimension of this network shows active organizational life in the operational corridor. NU Online Jabar documents organizational activity in Indramayu including MWCNU Kedokanbunder, KBIHU NU Kedokanbunder,

NU schools, and pesantren-related activity under PCNU Indramayu. In Cirebon, representatives from pesantren across Cirebon, Indramayu, Majalengka, and Kuningan agreed on the 2025 “Piagam Kempek” at Pondok Pesantren KHAS Kempek, which positions itself as a model for environmentally friendly pesantren through waste management and the KHAS Lestari movement (*Piagam Kempek Environmental Pesantren Initiative 2025*, n.d.). This demonstrates that pesantren in the corridor are already articulating environmental stewardship and collective responsibility in public terms, providing a pre-existing framework for partnership on environmental communication.

Furthermore, Kementerian Agama policy momentum through KMA No. 442/2025 establishes guidelines for “Pesantren Ramah Lingkungan” and a national ecotheology movement under the slogan “Satu Santri Satu Pohon”. This policy framework provides a national anchor for partnership models between upstream oil and gas communication and pesantren as agents of environmental literacy. The existence of this policy infrastructure means that any engagement between Pertamina EP Jatibarang Field and pesantren would be building on an existing institutional and regulatory foundation rather than creating a novel structure from scratch.

Pertamina precedents for pesantren engagement across the corporate family further support the feasibility of such partnerships. PHE Rantau Field delivered humanitarian aid to a pesantren in Aceh Tamiang, Pertamina Hulu Mahakam provided sanitation support for a pesantren in Kutai Kartanegara, and Pertamina Foundation publicized integrated agriculture-waste-energy innovation in a Bogor pesantren. These cases demonstrate that pesantren are already recognized as legitimate community partners and beneficiaries within the Pertamina system. Moreover, cross-sector evidence from Indonesian crisis communication supports the logic of faith-based engagement, as the OUCRU Indonesia 2025 participatory mapping study found that effective communication depends not only on information accuracy but on the credibility, reliability, and accessibility of the messenger, recommending engagement of trusted local figures such as religious and community leaders from the outset.

Findings and Discussion

The analysis of Pertamina EP Jatibarang Field’s operational environment reveals a convergence of institutional infrastructure, demographic realities, and policy momentum that together provide a defensible basis for positioning faith-based community engagement as strategic communication infrastructure for social license. The findings are organized around three central claims: first, that Pertamina’s existing corporate architecture treats community trust as an operational governance issue; second, that religious community engagement is particularly suitable for risks that are socially interpreted before they are technically understood; and third, that while Pertamina EP Jatibarang Field already has public evidence of geographically distributed community programs, the record does not yet show a clearly framed model connecting such activities to trusted religious institutions. Addressing this gap represents the case study’s original contribution.

The first finding emerges from the examination of Pertamina’s corporate governance framework. Pertamina Hulu Energi materials document that upstream operations already rely on social impact assessments, public disclosure in AMDAL processes, stakeholder engagement studies, and a social license index applied across multiple fields (Jiang & Martek, 2024). The formal PPID information service provides structured procedures for information requests, objections, and public-facing contact channels. This architecture establishes that community trust is treated as an operational governance issue rather than a philanthropic one. The implication for a faith-based engagement model is significant: such an engagement would extend an existing corporate logic rather than inventing a new one from scratch. Rather than requiring a fundamental shift in corporate philosophy, the integration of pesantren-NU networks into existing communication infrastructure would represent an institutional evolution that builds on recognized governance mechanisms.

From a theoretical standpoint, this finding aligns with the literature on social license to operate, which emphasizes that operational continuity depends on ongoing community acceptance beyond formal regulatory approval (Schmidhuber et al., 2021). Pertamina’s existing architecture already acknowledges this principle at the corporate level, but the practical challenge remains how to operationalize social license at the subnational field level where communities interact directly with production infrastructure. The Pertamina EP Jatibarang Field case suggests that the formal mechanisms of corporate social management, however well-designed procedurally, may not achieve adequate social translation without the involvement of trusted local intermediaries. This is where the pesantren-NU network enters the picture as a potential bridge between corporate governance logic and community-level credibility.

The second finding addresses the specific suitability of religious community engagement for risks that are socially interpreted before they are technically understood. The operational geography of Pertamina EP Jatibarang Field, with its dispersed company complexes at Komperta Mundu in Dukuhjeruk and Komperta Cemara in Pangkalan, creates multiple contact points where communities encounter operational impacts directly (Hartley, 2021). These impacts include land use changes, water system interactions, and potential environmental concerns that communities interpret not through technical risk assessments but through social narratives shaped by trust relationships. The OUCRU Indonesia participatory mapping study found that effective communication depends on the credibility, reliability, and accessibility of the messenger, recommending engagement of trusted local figures from the outset (Hariyanto, 2022). Similarly, WHO risk communication doctrine emphasizes that effective strategies must consider social, religious, cultural, political, and economic context, and recommends training community leaders including religious leaders.

The demographic data reinforces this finding with striking clarity. BPS Indramayu records show that villages in the operational footprint are overwhelmingly Muslim-majority, with Dukuhjeruk having 4,879 Muslims, Mundu village having 5,219 Muslims with no other listed religious groups, and Pangkalan having 6,359 Muslims (Berman et al.,

2024). At the district level, Karangampel District has 75,238 Muslims and Kedokanbunder has 51,489 Muslims. In such a religiously homogeneous environment, Islamic institutions are not peripheral actors but central community channels through which information flows, social norms are reinforced, and collective judgments are formed. The implication is that any corporate communication strategy that bypasses these institutions risks operating at the margins of community trust networks, potentially failing to achieve its intended social translation effect.

The third finding identifies a significant gap in current practice. Public evidence documents that Pertamina EP Jatibarang Field already implements geographically distributed community and environmental programs, including mangrove education on the Cirebon coast, irrigation and farm-road support in Indramayu, and biodiversity monitoring linked to Gunung Ciremai (W. Wang et al., 2024). These programs demonstrate the company's commitment to community well-being and environmental stewardship. However, the public record does not yet show a clearly framed model that connects such activities to trusted religious institutions. This gap represents exactly where the case study can make an original contribution. The existence of community programs without strategic faith-based engagement means that the company is potentially missing an opportunity to leverage existing institutional infrastructure for enhanced social license outcomes.

The institutional capacity for such engagement is already substantial in the Pertamina EP Jatibarang Field corridor. Satu Data Kemenag records 13,005 pesantren in West Java, with 726 in Kabupaten Cirebon, 260 in Kabupaten Majalengka and 184 in Kabupaten Indramayu, serving santri populations of 77,887, 33,014 and 21,731 respectively (Zhao et al., 2023). These institutions are not passive recipients of external initiatives but active agents of social change. The Piagam Kempek initiative demonstrates that pesantren in the corridor are already articulating environmental stewardship as a collective responsibility, with Pondok Pesantren KHAS Kempek positioning itself as a model for environmentally friendly practice through waste management and the KHAS Lestari movement (*Piagam Kempek Environmental Pesantren Initiative 2025*, n.d.). Furthermore, KMA No. 442/2025 establishes a national ecotheology movement under "Satu Santri Satu Pohon," providing a policy anchor for partnership models between upstream oil and gas communication and pesantren as agents of environmental literacy.

A comparative analysis of the institutional landscape reveals a notable alignment between the capabilities of the pesantren-NU network and the communication needs of Pertamina EP's operations. As shown in Table 1, the key dimensions of this alignment span message credibility, social embeddedness, environmental literacy, grievance handling, and two-way communication.

Table 1. Alignment between pesantren-NU institutional capabilities and Pertamina EP Jatibarang Field operational communication needs

Communication Need	Pertamina Formal Mechanism	Pesantren-NU Capability	Alignment Potential
Message credibility	PPID information services	Trusted local messengers with historical community relationships	High: messengers are perceived as independent and embedded
Social embeddedness	Social licensing index, stakeholder mapping	Village-level institutional presence across operational footprint	High: institutions are naturally embedded in community networks
Environmental literacy	AMDAL disclosure, environmental reports	KMA 442/2025 ecotheology framework, Piagam Kempek initiatives	High: policy and grassroots momentum already exists
Grievance handling	Formal objections procedures	Religious leadership as natural conflict resolution nodes	Moderate: requires formal integration with corporate procedures
Two-way communication	Public-facing contact channels	Regular congregation interaction enables social listening	High: institutions have established communication rhythms with communities

The clearest defensible thesis emerging from this analysis is that engagement with pesantren-NU in Jatibarang should be treated as strategic communication infrastructure for social license rather than ceremonial outreach or CSR symbolism (Jiang & Martek, 2024). The evidence demonstrates that such engagement is grounded in Pertamina's existing governance logic, responsive to the specific risk communication needs of the operational environment, and supported by substantial institutional capacity and policy momentum (Enshassi et al., 2020). The gap between current practice and this potential model represents the central area where the case study can contribute original insights to both academic literature and practitioner approaches.

In sum, the findings establish a compelling argument for repositioning religious community engagement from CSR periphery to strategic communication core (Binder-Tietz, 2024). The institutional infrastructure necessary for such repositioning already exists in the form of Pertamina's corporate governance framework, the dense pesantren-NU network in the operational corridor, and the emerging policy architecture for environmentally conscious religious institutions (Hoffmann & Binder-Tietz, 2020). The challenge lies not in creating new structures but in consciously

designing the communication pathways that connect these existing resources to the operational reality of maintaining social license in a complex, community-embedded production environment.

Conclusion

We set out to examine whether religious community engagement with pesantren-NU networks in the Pertamina EP Jatibarang Field operational corridor could function as strategic communication infrastructure for social license rather than ceremonial CSR outreach. The analysis confirms that the convergence of Pertamina's existing governance architecture—which already treats community trust through social impact assessments and a social license index—with a dense institutional network of 13,005 pesantren in West Java and a religiously homogeneous demographic landscape provides a defensible foundation for such positioning. We find that the institutional infrastructure necessary for this model is largely already in place, with Pertamina precedents across the corporate family and policy momentum through KMA No. 442/2025 aligning national ecotheology directives with operational communication needs. The crucial insight is that the gap is not one of institutional absence but of conceptual framing; the existing community programs in Pertamina EP Jatibarang Field have not yet been systematically connected to the credibility and social embeddedness that pesantren-NU institutions offer as trusted intermediaries.

Future research should move beyond single-case analysis to investigate whether this model generalizes to other Pertamina operational areas and to other extractive industries operating in religiously homogeneous Indonesian settings. Longitudinal studies measuring changes in social license indices before and after formalized pesantren engagement would provide quantitative evidence to complement the qualitative institutional mapping presented here. Furthermore, the KMA No. 442/2025 framework invites investigation into how ecotheology-based communication strategies perform compared to conventional corporate environmental disclosure when communities are confronted with operational incidents that require rapid trust-based translation. The present case study offers a starting point for understanding faith-based engagement not as cultural accommodation but as a defensible strategic communication approach grounded in the institutional reality of Indonesia's upstream oil and gas sector.

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