

Communication as Structural Intervention: Rethinking Anti-Trafficking Advocacy in East Nusa Tenggara

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ABSTRACT

Human trafficking in East Nusa Tenggara (NTT), Indonesia, remains a critical human rights issue shaped by both criminal practices and structural inequalities. This study examines anti-trafficking advocacy through communication practices and develops a context-sensitive framework for more effective interventions. Based on a qualitative single-case study conducted between May to November 2025, drawing on interviews with grassroots activists, participant observation, and insights from trafficking survivors, the findings reveal that anti-trafficking communication is deeply embedded in local cultural contexts – utilizing Indigenous languages, customary authorities, and community trust networks. However, these efforts remain constrained by limited communication infrastructure, resource shortages, and fragmented institutional coordination. Although storytelling is effective in raising awareness, its impact is limited without structural support. The study concludes that communication should be seen as a structural intervention linked to broader socio-economic reforms, and recommends culturally grounded, participatory, and multi-channel strategies alongside improved infrastructure and institutional coordination.

Keywords: Human trafficking; communication advocacy; structural inequality; East Nusa Tenggara; grassroots intervention

Komunikasi sebagai Intervensi Struktural: Memikirkan Ulang Advokasi Anti-Perdagangan Orang di Nusa Tenggara Timur

ABSTRAK

Perdagangan manusia di Nusa Tenggara Timur (NTT), Indonesia, tetap menjadi isu hak asasi manusia yang krusial, yang dipengaruhi tidak hanya oleh praktik kriminal, tetapi juga oleh ketimpangan struktural. Penelitian ini mengkaji advokasi anti-perdagangan manusia melalui praktik komunikasi serta mengembangkan kerangka kerja yang berlandaskan konteks lokal untuk intervensi yang lebih efektif. Berdasarkan studi kasus tunggal kualitatif yang dilakukan antara Mei hingga November 2025, dengan memanfaatkan wawancara terhadap aktivis akar rumput, observasi partisipatif, dan perspektif para penyintas perdagangan manusia, temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa komunikasi dalam upaya pemberantasan perdagangan manusia sangat berakar pada konteks budaya lokal – dengan memanfaatkan bahasa-bahasa adat, otoritas adat, dan jaringan kepercayaan masyarakat. Namun, upaya-upaya tersebut masih menghadapi kendala berupa keterbatasan infrastruktur komunikasi, kekurangan sumber daya, serta koordinasi kelembagaan yang terfragmentasi. Meskipun penceritaan (storytelling) efektif dalam meningkatkan kesadaran, dampaknya tetap terbatas tanpa dukungan struktural. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa komunikasi perlu dipahami sebagai intervensi struktural yang terkait dengan reformasi sosial-ekonomi yang lebih luas, serta merekomendasikan penguatan strategi yang berbasis budaya, partisipatif, dan multikanal, disertai peningkatan infrastruktur dan koordinasi kelembagaan.

Kata-kata Kunci: Perdagangan manusia; advokasi komunikasi; ketimpangan structural; Nusa Tenggara Timur; intervensi akar rumput

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INTRODUCTION

Human trafficking remains one of the most persistent transnational human rights violations of the contemporary era, affecting virtually all regions of the world. Recent global estimates suggest that millions of individuals continue to be trapped in forced labor, sexual exploitation, and other forms of modern slavery, with women and children disproportionately affected (International Organization for Migration et al., 2022; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2024). Over the past decade, scholarship has increasingly emphasized that trafficking cannot be understood solely as a criminal justice issue. Instead, it is deeply embedded in structural inequalities, including poverty, gender inequality, weak labor protections, and unequal development trajectories that systematically produce vulnerability (International Organization for Migration et al., 2022; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2024).

Recent studies in migration and trafficking research further highlight that labor mobility regimes, especially in the Global South, often produce conditions in which individuals seeking economic improvement are exposed to deceptive recruitment systems and exploitative intermediaries (Domingo et al., n.d.). Indonesia, in this regard, occupies a critical position as a source, transit, and destination country for trafficking flows, encompassing forced labor, domestic servitude, and sexual exploitation (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2024). While existing policy responses have largely prioritized law enforcement and border control, recent interdisciplinary scholarship argues that such approaches remain insufficient without addressing the communicative, cultural, and discursive dimensions that shape vulnerability and intervention effectiveness (Perloff, 2023).

Within this broader global context, East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia, provides a particularly important case for examining the intersection of structural vulnerability and communication processes. The province is geographically fragmented across more than 1,000 islands, characterized by limited infrastructure, seasonal isolation, and weak inter-island connectivity (*Trafficking in NTT*, n.d.). These geographic constraints intersect with persistent socio-economic deprivation, as East Nusa Tenggara consistently records among the highest poverty rates in Indonesia and limited access to education and formal employment. As a result, labor migration becomes a dominant livelihood strategy, but one that is often structurally precarious and highly susceptible to trafficking risks (Domingo et al., n.d.).

In addition to structural constraints, recent development communication literature stresses the importance of cultural and relational contexts in shaping the effectiveness of social interventions (Alakwe & Okpara, 2022; Katunga et al., 2023; Sulaiman et al., 2024). In East Nusa Tenggara, communication ecosystems are shaped by linguistic diversity, Indigenous (*adat*)-based governance systems, and strong religious institutions, all of which influence how messages about migration, risk, and protection are interpreted. However, most anti-trafficking interventions in Indonesia continue to rely on standardized, top-down communication models that insufficiently engage with local epistemologies and authority structures (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2024). This mismatch has been identified in recent studies as a key limitation of trafficking prevention efforts, particularly in rural and geographically isolated regions (Domingo et al., n.d.; International Organization for Migration et al., 2022).

Despite significant progress in trafficking research over the last decade – particularly

in legal frameworks, migration governance, and structural economic analysis – communication remains under-theorized in anti-trafficking scholarship. Existing studies tend to treat communication as a technical tool for awareness-raising (Perloff, 2023) rather than as a constitutive process that shapes meaning-making, power relations, and behavioral outcomes. While recent scholarship on cultural communication (Muir et al., 2016), communication accommodation theory (Zhang & Giles, 2017), and participatory development communication (Tajon et al., 2026) offers valuable frameworks for understanding communication across diverse socio-cultural contexts, few empirical studies have systematically employed these perspectives to examine anti-trafficking advocacy in culturally complex and institutionally constrained regions such as eastern Indonesia. Contemporary scholarship further suggests that anti-trafficking interventions are deeply shaped by underlying problem representations, institutional logics, and moral frameworks that influence how communication with victims and communities is enacted (Henriksson, 2025). Emerging research also highlights how communication practices – such as visual imagery, media narratives, and public discourse – continue to reproduce simplified and often stereotypical representations of trafficking, thereby shaping both policy responses and public understanding (Foot, 2024; Rossoni et al., 2024).

Moreover, there is limited empirical understanding of how grassroots practitioners actually design, negotiate, and implement communication strategies in real-world anti-trafficking work. Although a small but growing body of research has begun to examine practitioner experiences, these studies remain context-specific and fragmented. For instance, qualitative research in Europe and United States demonstrates that anti-trafficking programs are mediated through complex relational dynamics between practitioners and beneficiaries, revealing how communication is embedded within structures of conditional inclusion and power negotiation (Semprebon, 2024).

Similarly, recent analyses of anti-trafficking infrastructures – such as helplines – show that communication systems function as both products of and interventions within broader socio-technical ecosystems, yet remain under-studied (Cockbain & Tompson, 2024). Other empirical studies underscore persistent gaps in understanding how coordination, framing, and inter-agency communication shape anti-trafficking outcomes, particularly under conditions of institutional fragmentation and structural inequality (Jones, 2023a). Taken together, these emerging works point to the need for more grounded, context-sensitive analyses of communication as a lived, negotiated, and power-laden practice within anti-trafficking advocacy.

This study addresses this gap by arguing that anti-trafficking communication is not merely instrumental – a means of transmitting information – but constitutive, shaping how vulnerability, migration risk, agency, and protection are socially constructed, interpreted, and acted upon by communities, survivors, and institutions (Ashcraft, 2021; Cooren, 2020). Drawing on social constructionist communication theory, which conceptualizes communication as a process through which social realities, identities, and power relations are continuously produced and negotiated (Cooren, 2020; Schoeneborn et al., 2019), this research integrates theoretical insights with qualitative field evidence from grassroots anti-trafficking practice in East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia. The study's primary contribution lies in demonstrating how communication practices embedded in local cultural norms, community networks, and everyday interactions influence anti-trafficking efforts in a region that remains largely absent from global trafficking scholarship. Unlike prior research, which

has tended to emphasize institutional, legal, or policy-level responses to human trafficking, this study centers the lived communication experiences of frontline activists and survivors, thereby bridging the gap between social constructionist communication theory and grounded anti-trafficking practice.

Accordingly, this study aims to: 1) Examine how grassroots anti-trafficking practitioners in East Nusa Tenggara conceptualize and enact communication strategies in their advocacy work; 2) Identify structural, cultural, and infrastructural factors that constrain or enable effective communication practices; 3) Develop a contextually grounded analytical framework that integrates communication theory with empirical insights from fieldwork. To achieve these objectives, this study adopts a qualitative case study design, enabling a nuanced and contextually grounded examination of how anti-trafficking communication is constructed, enacted, and negotiated at the grassroots level.

This study contributes to both communication scholarship and anti-trafficking practice in three ways. *First*, it provides a grounded empirical account of communication practices in a high-vulnerability, low-infrastructure context. *Second*, it advances a theoretical synthesis that positions communication as a structural intervention rather than a peripheral tool. *Third*, it offers practical principles for advocacy, including cultural embeddedness, participatory engagement, multi-channel communication, and sensitivity to structural constraints.

At its core, this study argues that effective anti-trafficking communication in East Nusa Tenggara cannot be standardized or externally imposed. Instead, it must emerge from local socio-cultural realities and be sustained through relational, participatory, and context-sensitive engagement. In doing so, communication becomes not only a mechanism for awareness-raising but also a transformative practice that reshapes the conditions under which vulnerability is produced and contested.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative-interpretivist paradigm using a single-case study design to examine anti-trafficking communication practices in East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia. A case study approach is appropriate because it enables an in-depth, context-sensitive understanding of complex social phenomena in real-life settings, particularly where structural, cultural, and communicative factors intersect (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). Recent methodological literature also highlights case study research as especially suitable for analyzing multi-level governance and communication systems in development and human rights contexts characterized by complexity and institutional fragmentation (Strang, 2015). East Nusa Tenggara is selected as a critical and extreme case due to its persistent poverty, geographic fragmentation, and migration-related vulnerabilities, alongside active grassroots anti-trafficking advocacy. This allows for analytical rather than statistical generalization, generating theoretical insights into communication under conditions of marginalization.

The study employs an embedded case design, examining multiple units of analysis, including government institutions, civil society organizations, religious actors, and customary leadership systems. The subject of the study is frontline anti-trafficking communicators, while the object is their communicative practices in advocacy contexts. Data were collected from May to November 2025 through participant observation, semi-structured in-depth interviews, document analysis, and informal conversations. Primary

data were collected through purposive sampling of six leading anti-trafficking activists affiliated with TRUK-F Maumere and Kareka Sumba, organizations that play a central role in anti-trafficking prevention, advocacy, and victim assistance in Flores and Sumba. Purposive sampling is widely used in qualitative research to select information-rich participants relevant to the study focus (Czernek-Marszałek & McCabe, 2024; Magnone & Yezierski, 2024; Mvondo & Niu, 2024). Additional engagement with five trafficking survivors through observation and informal dialogue enriched contextual depth and enabled triangulation.

Data were analyzed using hybrid inductive-deductive thematic analysis. Inductive coding identified patterns in communication strategies, challenges, and practices, while deductive interpretation situated these findings within contemporary communication scholarship, particularly communication accommodation theory (Giles et al., 2023; Liao et al., 2021; D. Liu et al., 2022), discourse and power theory (Roslyng & Dindler, 2023; Tandoc, 2022), media richness theory (Guydish & Fox Tree, 2021), and constitutive approaches to communication (Cooren, 2020; Schoeneborn et al., 2019). Trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checking, following established qualitative standards of credibility and rigor (Yin, 2018).

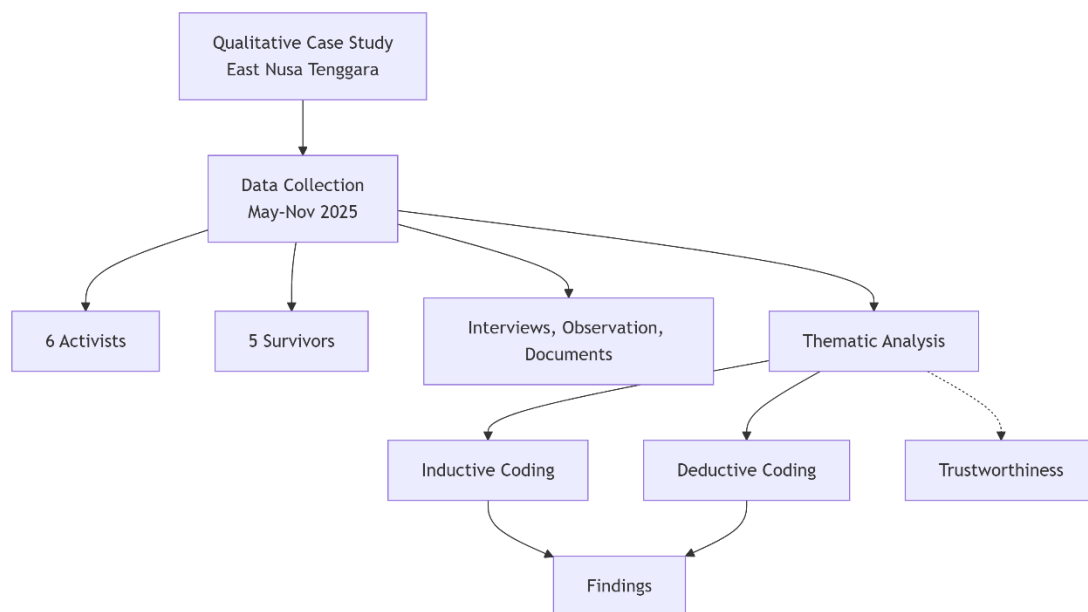


Figure 1. Research Design and Methodology Framework

RESULT

The findings reveal that anti-trafficking communication in East Nusa Tenggara is not a linear or purely informational process but a culturally embedded, materially constrained, and institutionally mediated practice. Across interviews with six frontline practitioners, four interrelated dimensions structure communication effectiveness: (1) culturally grounded communication, (2) infrastructural inequality, (3) institutional fragmentation, and (4) evidence-based storytelling. These dimensions are not discrete variables but mutually constitutive conditions, reinforcing recent shifts in development communication theory that emphasize relationality, power, and structural embeddedness.

Culturally Grounded Communication: Language, Authority, and Gendered Access

Communication effectiveness depends less on message content than on cultural legitimacy and relational positioning. Practitioners emphasized that the use of formal Indonesian without cultural translation often results in disengagement, particularly in rural areas where local dialects remain dominant. In many cases, community members may understand the literal meaning of a message yet remain emotionally or socially detached from it, as the language fails to resonate with lived experience, local metaphors, and shared cultural references. In this context, language operates as a structural gateway to participation rather than a neutral medium. It not only determines whether information is understood, but also signals who the message is for, who is authorized to speak, and whose knowledge is valued.

This finding aligns with recent research showing that linguistic localization is central to fostering trust and comprehension in marginalized communities (Dutta, 2020). It also extends prior work by demonstrating that failure to localize language does not simply reduce clarity but actively produces perceptions of external imposition, thereby undermining communicative legitimacy. As Bombi,¹ one of Kareka Sumba's activists, explained,

"We say: don't accept a job offer just because someone promises a big harvest. First check the seeds. If they won't show you the seeds, there is no harvest." People understand farming. They don't understand legal words like 'contract' or 'debt bondage' (Interview, 2025).

This observation illustrates how communicators strategically translate complex legal concepts into culturally meaningful metaphors that resonate with local livelihoods and everyday experience. In practice, failure to employ such culturally grounded communication often leads to passive resistance, selective listening, or polite compliance without meaningful behavioral change, revealing a gap between message delivery and actual engagement.

Beyond linguistic adaptation, the findings highlight the centrality of traditional authority structures in mediating communication. Engagement with customary leaders (*kepala suku/kepala kampung adat*) is consistently identified as a prerequisite for message acceptance. These actors function not merely as gatekeepers but as interpretive authorities who translate external messages into locally meaningful moral frameworks. Their role extends beyond endorsement; they actively reshape the narrative, embedding anti-trafficking messages within existing norms related to kinship, obligation, honor, and communal responsibility. This supports the concept of "hybrid governance," in which formal and informal institutions coexist and jointly shape development outcomes (Abbott & Faude, 2022; Dahlberg & Söderberg, 2024; Pache et al., 2024). However, the findings go further by showing that communication itself is filtered through these authority structures, meaning that message circulation is contingent upon cultural endorsement rather than institutional origin. In some cases, messages that bypass these authorities are not openly rejected but simply fail to circulate, remaining socially invisible. This underscores that communicative reach is not determined by dissemination strategies alone, but by alignment with locally recognized systems of legitimacy and authority.

Gender norms introduce an additional layer of communicative constraint. Women –

¹ The name of this participant, like those of all participants referenced in this article, is a pseudonym used to protect their identity and ensure their safety, in accordance with their request.

despite being disproportionately affected by trafficking – often face restrictions in public speaking spaces, particularly in mixed-gender forums. These restrictions are not always formalized but are embedded in expectations about propriety, respect, and social hierarchy, which shape who can speak, when, and in what manner. As a result, practitioners rely on indirect, relational communication channels such as church groups, home visits, and female intermediaries. These spaces allow for more open dialogue, emotional expression, and trust-building. As Ika, a TRUK-F staff member, noted,

“We cannot just put up a poster and hope people understand. In Maumere and the villages, people need to see your face, know your name, and feel that you are not judging them. We go to church gatherings, we sit with mothers after mass, and we talk slowly about migration” (Interview, 2025).

This testimony demonstrates how communication access is often achieved through trusted social and religious networks that provide culturally acceptable spaces for women’s engagement. While such channels facilitate trust-building and meaningful dialogue, they also limit the scale and visibility of women’s participation in public discourse.

This finding resonates with feminist development literature emphasizing that access to voice is socially structured and requires context-specific strategies (Fitch et al., 2023; Nartey, 2024; Peterson-Salahuddin, 2025; Wilkins, 2024). Importantly, the data suggest that gender is not only a demographic variable but a communicative condition that shapes the flow, visibility, and reception of information. It influences not just who receives messages, but how those messages are interpreted, negotiated, and acted upon. Consequently, communication strategies that fail to account for these gendered dynamics risk reinforcing existing silences rather than expanding meaningful participation.

Multi-Channel Outreach Under Infrastructural Inequality

The second major finding concerns the material conditions that shape communication feasibility. While policy frameworks increasingly emphasize digital communication, practitioners overwhelmingly identified face-to-face engagement as the most effective strategy. This preference is not merely a matter of habit or resource limitation, but reflects a grounded assessment of how communication actually works in contexts marked by vulnerability, mistrust, and cultural complexity.

In many cases, community members are more responsive to messages delivered through embodied presence, where tone, gesture, and interpersonal sensitivity can be calibrated in real time. Practitioners emphasized that trust is rarely pre-existing; rather, it must be cultivated gradually through repeated encounters, informal conversations, and sustained presence within the community. As Ika, a TRUK-F activist, explained,

“If we come directly and say ‘stop trafficking,’ people close their doors. They think we are police or government. So first we drink coffee. We ask about their children, their crops, their problems. After two or three visits, they ask us: ‘Why do you keep coming?’ Then we can talk” (Interview, 2025).

This testimony illustrates how anti-trafficking communication is embedded within everyday social interaction, where relationship-building precedes awareness-raising and persuasion. It also reflects the relational nature of anti-trafficking communication, which requires trust-building, dialogue, and emotional engagement – dimensions that are difficult to achieve through mediated channels alone (Bashir et al., 2026; Martin et al., 2022;

Semprebon, 2024; Youngvorst & Jones, 2025). Face-to-face communication thus operates not simply as a delivery mechanism but as a relational infrastructure through which credibility is constructed, negotiated, and maintained over time.

However, the effectiveness of interpersonal communication is significantly constrained by infrastructural inequality. Practitioners described how logistical challenges are not occasional disruptions but persistent structural conditions that shape the very possibility of engagement. Poor road conditions, limited transportation, lack of electricity, and weak digital connectivity restrict access to remote communities, particularly during certain seasons when travel becomes physically difficult or even impossible. These constraints also affect the frequency and continuity of engagement, often forcing practitioners to rely on sporadic visits rather than sustained interaction. As a result, communication becomes uneven not only across space but also over time, with long gaps between engagements weakening previously established relationships. The consequences of these interruptions are particularly evident in contexts where trafficking remains difficult to discuss openly. As Ika observed,

"We know many cases happen. The grandmothers know. But nobody says the words out loud. When we ask, people look down. They say 'tidak tahu' [don't know]. But their eyes say something else" (Interview, 2025).

This observation suggests that communication barriers are not merely informational but also social and emotional, requiring the sustained presence necessary to gradually overcome silence, fear, and social stigma. In some cases, practitioners must prioritize accessible areas due to limited resources, inadvertently reinforcing patterns of uneven outreach. These constraints produce uneven communication landscapes, where some communities are repeatedly reached while others remain structurally excluded. This finding aligns with recent scholarship on communication inequality, which highlights the role of physical infrastructure in shaping information access and participation (Acosta & Balamero-Quintana, 2024; Kim et al., 2025; Reddick et al., 2024). Building on this uneven distribution of communicative access, our analysis further reveals how such disparities crystallize into more entrenched forms of marginalization.

The concept of "communication exclusion zones" emerges from this analysis, referring to geographically and infrastructurally marginalized areas where consistent outreach is not feasible. These zones are not simply remote in a geographic sense, but are actively produced through the interaction of terrain, infrastructure, resource allocation, and institutional priorities. In such areas, the absence of regular communication is not due to a lack of awareness or intent on the part of practitioners, but rather the cumulative effect of material constraints that limit mobility and presence.

This finding extends existing literature by demonstrating that communication inequality is not only a function of digital divides but also of spatial and logistical barriers. Moreover, the existence of these exclusion zones has broader implications for anti-trafficking outcomes, as communities that are hardest to reach are often those most vulnerable to exploitation due to limited access to information, services, and protective networks. In such contexts, communication effectiveness is determined as much by roads and electricity as by message design or organizational capacity, underscoring the need to reconceptualize communication not as an isolated intervention, but as a practice deeply embedded within material and infrastructural realities.

Institutional Fragmentation, Policy Incoherence, and Loss of Continuity

A third key finding is the fragmented nature of institutional coordination in anti-trafficking communication. Practitioners consistently reported that organizations (NGOs/CSOs) operate in parallel rather than in coordination, resulting in duplication of efforts in some areas and gaps in others. This fragmentation leads to inconsistent messaging, particularly regarding safe migration procedures and legal protections, thereby undermining community trust. In practice, this means that different organizations often communicate similar information using different framing, terminology, and levels of urgency, which creates confusion among community members who rely on these messages for decision-making. As one activist from TRUK-F, Nina, noted, this variation in framing is often deliberate and shaped by efforts to resonate more deeply with local moral-religious worlds.

"We tell people: trafficking is not just a crime. It is a sin against your brother or sister because it treats a person like a thing. When we say it like that, mothers cry. Fathers become angry. They understand that this is not just about money but about who we are as Christians" (Interview, 2025).

While such moral and faith-based messaging can generate stronger emotional engagement, it also illustrates how institutional actors rely on divergent communicative registers, further contributing to fragmentation rather than coherence. Instead of a unified communication ecosystem, what emerges is a patchwork of overlapping initiatives that rarely reinforce one another strategically. Similar dynamics have been identified in transnational anti-trafficking governance, where weak coordination reduces both efficiency and legitimacy (Jones, 2023b; Pajón & Walsh, 2023; Ramli et al., 2025).

In addition to organizational fragmentation, the findings reveal a significant gap between legal frameworks and their implementation. Although Indonesia has established comprehensive anti-trafficking legislation, practitioners reported that cases are frequently reclassified under alternative legal categories, such as those related to the protection of workers, women, and children, which often result in reduced legal penalties for human trafficking perpetrators. This inconsistency produces what can be understood as a discursive disjunction between law and practice, weakening the credibility of communication campaigns. In operational terms, this means that the legal language used in awareness campaigns often does not match the realities experienced by victims or the actual prosecutorial pathways taken by law enforcement. As a result, communities may perceive anti-trafficking messaging as aspirational rather than actionable, which reduces trust in both institutions and communicators. This finding supports broader critiques of human rights governance, which emphasize the gap between normative frameworks and institutional enforcement (Barrett, 2024; Wolfsteller & Li, 2022).

Institutional instability further exacerbates these challenges. Frequent leadership turnover disrupts program continuity, erodes institutional memory, and shifts organizational priorities. Communication initiatives often depend on individual relationships rather than formalized systems, making them vulnerable to disruption. In practice, this leads to situations where successful communication strategies are not institutionalized but instead remain tied to specific personnel or short-term projects. When staff or leadership changes occur, previously established messaging strategies are often discontinued, modified without documentation, or replaced entirely. This produces a cyclical pattern in which organizations repeatedly "restart" communication efforts rather than building long-

term strategic continuity. This aligns with governance research highlighting the importance of institutional continuity for sustained development outcomes (Hansum, 2025; Nugroho et al., 2026; Zia Ud Din et al., 2023). The findings extend this literature by showing how instability directly affects communication ecosystems, producing episodic rather than cumulative advocacy efforts.

Evidence-Based Storytelling: Emotional Persuasion and Structural Limits

The fourth major finding highlights the strategic use of storytelling as a core communication tool. Practitioners emphasized that narratives based on real-life cases are significantly more effective than abstract statistics in generating awareness and emotional engagement. Stories reduce psychological distance, enabling audiences to identify with victims and perceive trafficking risks as immediate and relevant. In practice, storytelling is often deliberately localized, drawing on familiar social contexts, kinship relations, and migration pathways so that audiences can situate trafficking not as a distant or exceptional phenomenon, but as something embedded within everyday life. This alignment between narrative form and lived experience strengthens attentiveness and moral resonance, making communication more relatable and persuasive. As Robako, an activist from Kareka Sumba, explained,

"We don't tell people: 'you are vulnerable.' That makes them feel weak. Instead, we say: 'Our village has faced drought, has faced difficulties, but we survived because we worked together. Trafficking is another drought. We fight it together'" (Interview, 2025).

This narrative strategy demonstrates how storytelling can move beyond fear-based messaging by emphasizing collective resilience and shared responsibility, thereby fostering stronger community identification with anti-trafficking efforts. This aligns with narrative persuasion theory, which underscores the role of storytelling in shaping beliefs and attitudes (Bullock et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2024; Lillie et al., 2023; S. Liu & Yang, 2023; Polletta & Redman, 2020; Schmidt et al., 2023; Sukalla, 2023). In addition, such an approach helps transform audiences from passive recipients of information into active participants in meaning-making, which is crucial for sustaining long-term engagement in social change initiatives

However, the findings also reveal the limitations of awareness-centered approaches. While storytelling increases knowledge and emotional engagement, it does not necessarily lead to behavioral change in contexts where structural constraints – such as poverty, unemployment, and lack of local opportunities – persist. Practitioners noted that audiences may fully understand the risks of trafficking yet still consider migration as the only viable livelihood strategy. This produces a paradox in which awareness coexists with continued vulnerability, as decision-making is shaped less by information deficits and more by economic necessity and limited alternatives (Ademolu, 2023; Alakwe & Okpara, 2022; Joshi et al., 2024). This reflects a well-documented gap between awareness and action in development communication (Hochachka, 2024).

In response, practitioners are increasingly integrating communication with empowerment-based interventions, including vocational training, economic support, and legal assistance. This shift reflects a broader transformation from awareness-based models to communication for empowerment, where communication serves as an entry point into structural change (Cardey et al., 2024; Dikeocha, 2024; Odoom et al., 2024). In this emerging approach, storytelling is no longer treated as an end in itself but as part of a broader

intervention ecosystem that connects symbolic awareness with tangible pathways for reducing vulnerability. The findings thus indicate that effective anti-trafficking communication must operate across informational, emotional, and material dimensions.

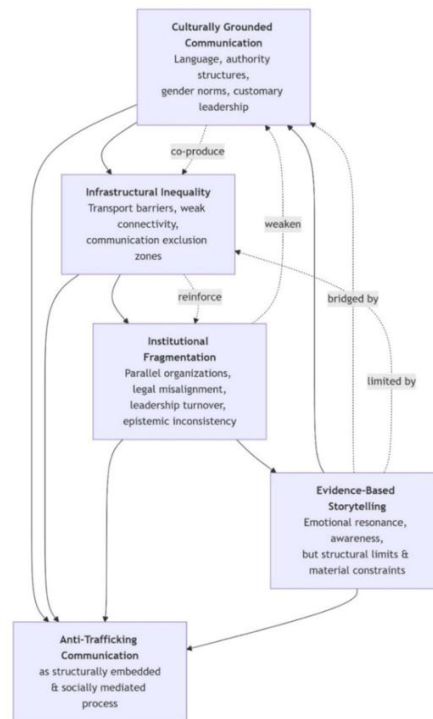


Figure 2. Major Findings of the Study: Four Interconnected Dimensions Shaping Anti-Trafficking Communication in East Nusa Tenggara

As illustrated in Figure 2, anti-trafficking communication emerges as a socially mediated process shaped by the interaction of culturally grounded communication, infrastructural inequality, institutional fragmentation, and evidence-based storytelling. Culturally embedded communication practices and narrative strategies help make anti-trafficking messages meaningful and persuasive, yet their effectiveness is often constrained by limited infrastructure and fragmented institutional arrangements. These structural conditions influence not only the reach of communication efforts but also their continuity, coordination, and long-term impact. The figure therefore underscores that anti-trafficking communication cannot be conceived merely as the dissemination of information; rather, it is embedded within broader cultural, material, and organizational structures that collectively shape the possibilities for empowerment and social change.

DISCUSSION

Anti-trafficking communication in East Nusa Tenggara is fundamentally a process of social construction rather than a simple transmission of information. From a social constructionist communication perspective, communication does not merely convey pre-existing realities but actively participates in producing social meanings, identities, and power relations through ongoing interaction (Cooren, 2020; Schoeneborn et al., 2019). The experiences of frontline activists show that the effectiveness of anti-trafficking interventions depends not only on message accuracy, but also on how social actors collectively negotiate what trafficking means, who is authorized to speak about it, and how risks and

responsibilities are interpreted. Communication therefore becomes a constitutive practice through which trafficking is made visible, understood, and contested in everyday social life, with meaning continuously co-created among activists, survivors, community members, customary leaders, and religious institutions.

The findings on culturally grounded communication further demonstrate this constitutive role of communication. Activists' use of local metaphors, dialects, and culturally resonant narratives shows that communication effectiveness depends on the social production of shared meanings rather than message transmission alone. Key concepts such as labor contracts, recruitment fraud, or debt bondage only become meaningful when translated into symbolic frameworks rooted in local lifeworlds. Language, in this sense, is not merely a medium for information but a site where social reality is constructed and negotiated. The use of agricultural metaphors, for instance, enables communities to reinterpret trafficking risks through familiar experiences, transforming abstract legal categories into socially meaningful realities. This supports social constructionist arguments that communication does not reflect reality but actively constitutes it, as communities shape understandings of vulnerability, migration, exploitation, and protection through interpretive processes.

At the same time, the findings reveal that communication is inseparable from power relations. Social constructionist theory emphasizes how communicative processes are embedded within structures of authority, shaping whose voices are heard and whose meanings prevail (Cooren, 2020). In this study, customary leaders, religious authorities, and gender norms play a decisive role in determining communicative legitimacy. Messages gain credibility not simply through institutional authority but through endorsement by locally recognized figures who interpret and reframe them within cultural and moral frameworks. Similarly, women's restricted participation in public forums shows how communicative opportunities are unevenly distributed. Activists therefore must create alternative communicative spaces – such as church gatherings, home visits, and women-centered networks – where marginalized voices can participate more freely. Anti-trafficking communication thus emerges as an ongoing negotiation of power, legitimacy, and representation rather than a neutral exchange of information.

The findings on infrastructural inequality further extend social constructionist communication theory by showing that communication is also materially constituted. Roads, transportation systems, electricity, and internet access are not merely background conditions but active elements that shape communicative possibilities. The emergence of "communication exclusion zones" illustrates how material infrastructures participate in constructing social realities by determining which communities can sustain meaningful interaction and which remain isolated. In this sense, vulnerability to trafficking is not only economic or geographic but also communicatively produced through unequal access to sustained dialogue and engagement. This highlights that communication inequalities are simultaneously symbolic and material, requiring analytical attention to both discourse and infrastructure in understanding how social realities are formed.

Finally, the fragmented institutional landscape and the practice of evidence-based storytelling illustrate the multiplicity and transformative potential of socially constructed realities. Different organizations produce competing narratives of trafficking through legal, moral, religious, and human rights frames, resulting in multiple coexisting "realities" rather than a unified understanding of the issue. This fragmentation shapes how communities

interpret trafficking and affects institutional legitimacy, especially when legal definitions and enforcement practices diverge. At the same time, storytelling based on survivor experiences demonstrates how communication can reshape meaning by reframing trafficking as a shared social challenge rather than an individual failure. However, the findings also show that such meaning-making is insufficient without structural change, as awareness does not automatically translate into behavioral change under conditions of poverty and limited livelihood options. Consequently, anti-trafficking communication must be understood as a dual process of constructing meaning and enabling material transformation, where new social realities are co-produced through the integration of narrative, empowerment, and structural support.

CONCLUSION

This study fulfils its research objectives by showing that anti-trafficking communication in East Nusa Tenggara is a relational and structurally embedded practice shaped by cultural legitimacy, infrastructural access, institutional coherence, and narrative framing. Rather than a simple process of information delivery, its effectiveness depends on cultural translation, social mediation, and institutional coordination. Communication is most effective when grounded in local languages, mediated by trusted customary and religious authorities, and aligned with existing gender and social hierarchies. However, its impact is constrained by infrastructural barriers such as geographic isolation, weak transportation, and unreliable electricity, which produce persistent gaps in outreach. At the institutional level, fragmented coordination generates inconsistent messaging and undermines public trust, while survivor narratives – though powerful – risk individualizing trafficking if not linked to broader structural conditions.

Based on these findings, the study recommends participatory, culturally grounded communication approaches that position local communities, including customary leaders, religious institutions, women's groups, and survivors, as co-creators rather than passive recipients. This should be supported by sustained investment in infrastructure to reduce communicative exclusion in remote areas. Strengthening institutional coordination is also essential through shared communication frameworks, clearer inter-agency roles, and mechanisms that ensure continuity despite leadership turnover. Ultimately, communication strategies should integrate survivor storytelling with structural analysis so that trafficking is understood not as isolated individual cases, but as a manifestation of broader inequalities, including poverty, gender discrimination, and labor migration vulnerabilities.

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