

A social capital-based participatory communication model for sustainable conservation governance: evidence from Tesso Nilo Forest, Indonesia

¹Nurjanah Nurjanah, ¹Tantri P. Yazid, ¹Ismandianto Ismandianto, ²Muchid Albintani, ¹Rusmadi Awza, ¹Muhammad Firdaus

¹ Communication Science Study Program, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Riau, Pekanbaru, Indonesia; ² Government Science Study Program, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Riau, Pekanbaru, Indonesia.
Corresponding author: N. Nurjanah, nurjanah@lecturer.unri.ac.id

Abstract. The insufficiency of conservation strategies focused on the Tesso Nilo Region underscores the necessity for inclusive and participatory transformative governance frameworks. The objective of this investigation is to analyze communication dynamics, identify obstacles to participation, and develop a contextually appropriate participatory communication model that promotes sustainable development in Tesso Nilo. Employing a qualitative research methodology with a multiple case study framework, data were amassed through in-depth interviews with 24 key informants, focused group discussions, participatory observations, and document analysis conducted in three buffer villages within the region. Thematic analyses were executed, bolstered by the triangulation of data to substantiate the findings. The results indicated that while official communication frequently exhibited exclusivity, local leaders and informal forums emerged as effective mediums for dialogue that enhanced social capital. In light of these findings, a Social Capital-Based Participatory Communication Model was developed, comprising three fundamental pillars: (1) equitable dissemination of information, (2) facilitation of inclusive dialogue, and (3) collaborative decision-making processes. This model offers an operational framework designed to promote participatory, transparent, and equitable governance in conservation initiatives. This research contributes to theoretical discourse by synthesizing the concepts of participatory communication, social capital, and environmental governance, while providing practical implications for conservation policies tailored to local contexts. Its implementation is recommended through the establishment of village communication forums, structural engagement of local leaders, and the enhancement of community capacity building.

Keywords: community based conservation, environmental governance, participatory communication, social capital, sustainable management.

Introduction. The Tesso Nilo region represents one of the few remaining pristine tropical forest ecosystems in Indonesia. This locale has evolved into a crucial habitat for species at risk of extinction, such as the Sumatran elephants and Sumatran tigers. The area possesses significant conservation importance and is internationally acknowledged as an essential reservoir of biodiversity. However, in light of the pressing necessity for ecological preservation, Tesso Nilo is confronted with severe threats stemming from deforestation, land reclamation, the conversion of forests into plantations, and conflicts that arise between human populations and wildlife. Traditional conservation approaches, frequently characterized by centralizing and exclusionary paradigms, commonly referred to as fortress conservation, have demonstrated their inadequacy in achieving a harmonious equilibrium between the preservation of nature and the welfare of local communities (Sele, 2024). In this context, participatory communication emerges as a pivotal strategy for promoting inclusive, transparent, and sustainable governance in conservation, wherein communities are not merely passive recipients of policy but are also integral stakeholders in the decision-making process (Pahl, 2002).

A considerable obstacle in the administration of Tesso Nilo pertains to the predominance of unidirectional communication paradigms that are predominantly governed by governmental agencies and conservation organizations. Consequently, numerous conservation endeavors are inadequately comprehended by the populace, resulting in rejection, non-adherence, and even socio-cultural discord (Pavliuc, 2024; Pono, 2024). Individuals encounter a profound sense of alienation from the decision-making processes that directly influence their livelihoods and access to vital natural resources (Kang et al., 2025; Torres, 2025). This challenging circumstance is exacerbated by the absence of a clearly articulated and sustainable communication framework among stakeholders. Communication is primarily exhibited in a reactive fashion, manifesting only within the context of conflict. Power disparities among governmental entities, non-governmental organizations, and local communities increasingly engender inequities in decision-making processes, wherein the voices of the community are frequently marginalized.

Prior investigations have underscored the significance of participatory communication within the realm of natural resource management (Chew, 2024; Momme, 2025). The Study (Salam et al., 2006) Research conducted in Thailand (Salam et al., 2006) has revealed that participatory dialogue forums enhance both community trust and the efficacy of forest management practices. Furthermore, (Fariss et al., 2023; Ruano-Chamorro et al., 2022) highlight the necessity for communicative justice in community-driven conservation efforts, while the prevalence of bureaucratic hegemony undermines genuine participation in conservation initiatives in Indonesia. Simultaneously (Desmiwati & Christian, 2019) critiques the fortress conservation paradigm, advocating for a more inclusive methodology. Collectively, these insights establish a robust premise indicating that alterations in communication dynamics are essential for the achievement of sustainable conservation outcomes (Layden et al., 2025).

Consequently, this research offers novel contributions in both theoretical and practical dimensions. Practically, the outcomes of this study may serve as a significant asset for governmental agencies, non-governmental organizations, and funding institutions in designing genuinely participatory conservation initiatives. Furthermore, the study bolsters endeavors to realize the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), thereby rendering them pertinent not solely at the local level but also at the broader level. global.

Material and Method. This research employs a qualitative methodology (Chandra & Shang, 2019; Chen et al., 2021). utilizing a multiple case study framework to gain a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics inherent in participatory communication concerning the sustainable development of the Tesso Nilo Area. This methodological choice was made due to its capacity to elucidate meanings, social contexts, and the processes of interaction among stakeholders that remain unobservable through exclusively quantitative approaches (Busetto et al., 2020). Investigations were carried out in three specifically selected villages that are in close proximity to the Tesso Nilo Area conservation zone, each representing diverse levels of human-animal conflict, community involvement, and availability of information.

The selection of samples is conducted utilizing a purposive sampling approach, guided by predetermined criteria that necessitate active participation in territorial management activities or the capacity to function as an information disseminator. The total cohort of participants amounted to 24 individuals, comprising 8 constituents of the local population (inclusive of women and youth), 6 local leaders or village chiefs, 5 officers dedicated to conservation efforts, and 5 representatives affiliated with non-governmental organizations. The sampling procedure persists until thematic saturation is attained, which is defined by the lack of emergence of novel themes from subsequent interviews.

Research methodologies are executed in four principal phases: (1) preliminary investigations and initial observations aimed at delineating the socio-ecological framework; (2) primary data acquisition via comprehensive interviews, focused group discussions (Rozevink et al., 2025), and participatory observation (Delli & D'Auria, 2025); (3) compilation of secondary data from policy documents, program evaluations, and spatial representations; as well as (4) analysis and triangulation of data to substantiate the validity

of findings. The complete research endeavor was undertaken in adherence to the tenets of research ethics, encompassing written consent and the confidentiality of participants' identities.

Results and Discussion

The Tesso Nilo, Indonesia. Tesso Nilo is situated within Riau Province on Sumatra Island, Indonesia, and is recognized as one of the remaining lowland tropical forest ecosystems in the western part of Indonesia. From an administrative perspective, the area predominantly falls within Kuantan Singingi Regency, encompassing an expanse exceeding 38,000 hectares that has been designated as Tesso Nilo National Park since the year 2004. Enclosed by extensive agricultural lands, oil palm plantations, and human settlements, Tesso Nilo functions as a crucial buffer ecosystem that links the primary forest regions in the central part of the island with an intricate network of wildlife corridors. Its presence is of strategic significance not only from an ecological standpoint but also as a provider of essential environmental services, including water management, carbon sequestration, and the preservation of biodiversity.

Table 1

Objectives of Tesso Nilo National Park Hall

<i>Descriptions</i>	<i>Targets</i>
Promoting initiatives aimed at enhancing human welfare and life quality	- Effectively utilizing the capabilities of forest resources and environmental assets in a sustainable manner to foster an equitable economic framework and enhance public welfare; - Safeguarding the equilibrium of ecosystems and biodiversity, along with the preservation of Sustainable Development Areas (SDAs) as critical life support mechanisms to facilitate sustainable development.

Subsequently, based on the outcomes of dialogues with pivotal informants and community collectives in the Tesso Nilo Region, it was disclosed that communication frameworks regarding the governance of the area remain predominantly characterized by a hierarchical approach that is primarily informative and reactive in nature. Individuals are more inclined to receive directives that must be followed, rather than engaging in collaborative discussions aimed at identifying solutions, particularly when it is perceived that these directives do not adequately consider the economic and social realities faced by local populations. Nevertheless, while formal communication tends to exhibit exclusivity, informants also indicate the presence of effective and enduring informal communication channels at the community level.

The informants concurred that the resolution of human-animal conflicts, particularly those involving elephants, cannot be achieved solely through the implementation of patrols or punitive measures; rather, it necessitates the establishment of sustained dialogue. This forum may function as a mechanism for the early identification of issues, the mediation of disputes, and the formulation of collaborative strategies. Furthermore, there exists a robust optimism that the engagement of women and youth will be enhanced, as they possess distinctive insights regarding the utilization of natural resources and the prospects of ecotourism. Collectively, the insights derived from these discussions indicate that effective participatory communication frameworks in Tesso Nilo ought to be predicated on pre-existing social capital, to honor local structures, and to be formally institutionalized, thereby mitigating dependence on specific individuals.

Tesso Nilo development communication model. Participatory communication within the Tesso Nilo region transcends the mere dissemination of information; it embodies a governance paradigm that prioritizes the local community as the principal agent in the decision-making framework. Unlike the conventional hierarchical model, the participatory communication paradigm underscores the significance of bilateral dialogue, proactive involvement, and communal stewardship of conservation initiatives. In Tesso Nilo, where ecological and social conflicts frequently arise due to disparities in access and information,

this methodology has emerged as a critical strategy for fostering trust, mitigating opposition, and formulating sustainable solutions.

The epistemological foundation of this framework is derived from the participatory communication theory, which fundamentally critiques hierarchical structures within communication and underscores the significance of emancipation through dialogic engagement. Within the context of Tesso Nilo, this framework acknowledges that local communities are not solely recipients of benefits, but are also custodians of indigenous knowledge, keen ecological observers, and active participants in conservation efforts. Consequently, communication should be strategically crafted to empower rather than to dominate, thereby facilitating the inclusion of voices that have historically been marginalized. The foundational architecture of the participatory communication model in Tesso Nilo comprises three principal components: (1) equitable access to information, (2) regular dialogue platforms, and (3) collective decision-making processes. These three components are interrelated and are intended to foster a governance framework that is transparent, inclusive, and responsive to the unique dynamics of the local context. This model is characterized by its non-prescriptive nature, allowing for flexibility and adaptability to the socio-cultural conditions prevalent in the respective buffer villages.

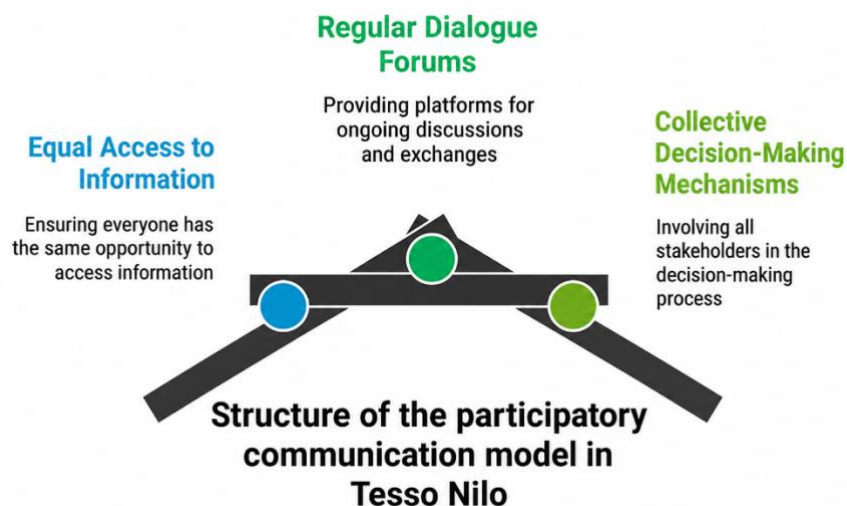


Figure 1. Communication model in the development of Tesso Nilo.

The initial pillar, equitable access to information, necessitates the evolution from a unidirectional information framework to a multi-channel platform that is readily accessible to all societal segments. This encompasses the utilization of local media, including community radio, village information boards, bilingual posters (in Bahasa Indonesia and indigenous dialects), as well as collaboratively managed WhatsApp groups. The information disseminated encompasses local regulations, wildlife monitoring outcomes, conflict mitigation initiatives, and opportunities for participation, all articulated in comprehensible language.

The second pillar, a routine dialogue forum, is intended to supplant formal meetings, which frequently exhibit ritualistic characteristics, with inclusive participatory discussions. This forum convenes on a monthly basis at the village level, facilitated by local mediators (such as village chiefs, religious leaders, or NGO representatives), and guarantees the involvement of women, youth, and marginalized farmers. Discussion subjects encompass the appraisal of conservation programs, the management of human-wildlife conflicts, and proposals for the development of community based ecotourism. The third pillar, collective decision making, represents the apex form of participation. Within this framework, communities are afforded a voice in the formulation of conservation programs, including the establishment of prohibition zones, forest restoration strategies, or the distribution of partnership funds. Decisions are reached through village deliberations that involve (Forest Village Community Institution), and representatives of local government, thereby enhancing legitimacy and accountability.

Overall, the participatory communication model at Tesso Nilo presents a comprehensive resolution to the exclusion-based conservation deadlock. By transforming communication into a mechanism of empowerment rather than control, this model not only enhances conservation efficacy but also fortifies social justice and community resilience. If broadly implemented, the model could serve as a paradigm for the management of conservation areas in other tropical regions confronting analogous challenges between ecological preservation and the rights of local communities.

Moreover, the innovative aspect of the results presented in this research is the formulation of a participatory communication framework that not only prioritizes dialogue but also systematically incorporates and leverages social capital as the fundamental foundation of the communication architecture itself. Social capital emerged as a pivotal component in participatory communication within Tesso Nilo, serving as the sole enduring and operational source of trust amidst the deterioration of formal institutional legitimacy. Consequently, governmental officials or institutional representatives are frequently perceived as adversaries, rather than collaborators.

Nevertheless, in such circumstances, trust in local authorities, such as the Talang Mamak tribal leaders or mosque imams, has remained robust. Empirical research indicates that individuals are more inclined to accept information regarding conservation when it is conveyed by familiar and respected figures, as opposed to through promotional materials or official pronouncements. Within the context of Tesso Nilo, characterized by intricate overlapping land claims and human-wildlife conflicts, social capital additionally functions as an inherent and expedited mechanism for conflict resolution. Indigenous assemblies frequently succeed in mediating disputes that are ineffectively addressed through bureaucratic channels. Absent the recognition and utilization of social capital, any endeavor aimed at participatory communication will persist as a superficial exercise that fails to engage with the core issue: the deficit of trust and collective ownership of conservation territories.

SWOT analysis: sustainable development of Tesso Nilo Area. The SWOT analysis pertaining to the Participatory Communication Model in the Sustainable Development of the Tesso Nilo Area is meticulously organized in an academic manner, systematically approached, and pertinent to the realms of environmental governance, community-based conservation, and natural resource management within contexts characterized by ecological social conflict. This analytical framework is applicable in scholarly publications, policy documentation, or programmatic recommendation structures.

The SWOT analysis offers a thorough assessment of the participatory communication model implemented in Tesso Nilo, characterized by a coherent framework and pertinent critical dimensions (Puyt et al., 2023). The SWOT framework encompasses institutional, social, economic, and political facets, illustrating a comprehensive grasp of the intricacies associated with conservation governance. Notable strengths include the enhancement of social capital, culturally sensitive methodologies, and advocacy for the principles of the Sustainable Development Goals, which correspond with contemporary research findings highlighting the significance of procedural equity in the stewardship of natural resources (Leonard, 2024). The establishment of regular dialogue forums as a mechanism for conflict prevention aligns with the principles of adaptive governance, which prioritize swift and cooperative responses (Ackermann, 2003; Schernbeck, 2017).

Table 2

SWOT analysis Tesso Nilo National Park development

<i>EFAS/ IFAS</i>	<i>OPPORTUNITY (O)</i> <i>Integration of national policies</i>	<i>THREAT (T)</i> <i>Pressure from plantation expansion</i>
	<i>Partnership with NGOs and WWF</i> <i>Community-based ecotourism development</i>	<i>Conflict of Interest</i> <i>Environmental disaster</i>
STRENGTH (S)	SO STRATEGY	ST STRATEGY
The role of stakeholders as mediators	There are directions from regulations regarding the management of the Tesso Nilo area	Utilizing the potential of tesso nilo to reduce environmental damage
Community support	Effective participatory communication model	Leveraging community support in maintaining local social and cultural conditions
Forum	Making use of existing natural resources to develop regional tourism	Utilizing the potential of natural resources to maintain the sustainability of Tesso Nilo
WEAKNESS (W)	WO STRATEGY	WT STRATEGY
Government dependence	The success of this model depends on the stakeholder system.	Maximizing strengths and opportunities
High operational costs	Improving the quality of human resources in providing tourism events	Improving the quality of human resources to maintain local social and cultural conditions
Digital and geographic barriers	Increasing digital internet access for transportation	Develop accountability and evaluation mechanisms.

Note : EFAS - internal factor analysis summary / strategy; IFAS - external factor analysis summary / strategy; SO - strengths-opportunities strategy; WO - weaknesses-opportunities; ST - strengths-threats; WT - weakness-threat.

Furthermore, the prospects delineated, including the amalgamation with national strategies and collaborative alliances, are indeed feasible within the framework of community-centric conservation. Nevertheless, challenges such as the proliferation of palm oil cultivation and the associated stigmatization of local populations necessitate substantiation through robust empirical evidence. Additionally, policies may originate not solely from centralized authorities but can also be derived from regional administrative bodies that frequently obstruct local innovative endeavors.

Moreover, it is essential that success indicators are delineated with precision to facilitate rigorous scientific assessment. Additionally, the aims of the operational unit and the primary goals to be executed in the stewardship of Tesso Nilo National Park must be clearly established.

Communication strategies aimed at enhancing the understanding of the Tesso Nilo forest. The establishment of these communication modalities is of paramount significance, as it constitutes one of the four principal elements in the formulation of effective and efficient communication strategies.

This visual representation elucidates the communicative strategies employed to enhance public consciousness regarding the Tesso Nilo forest, by categorizing the methodology into two principal dimensions: Communication Content Forms, wherein the Content Form dimension encompasses three essential elements that dictate the substance of a message, steering community factions towards paradigm shifts, and employing redundancy through habitual social interactions. Concurrently, the Communication model constitutes an integral component of a fourfold strategy: informative, persuasive, educative, and coercive. This conceptual framework tacitly endorses a communication

paradigm for development, which underscores that communication transcends mere information dissemination, serving also as a mechanism for behavioral modification and empowerment (Chew, 2024).

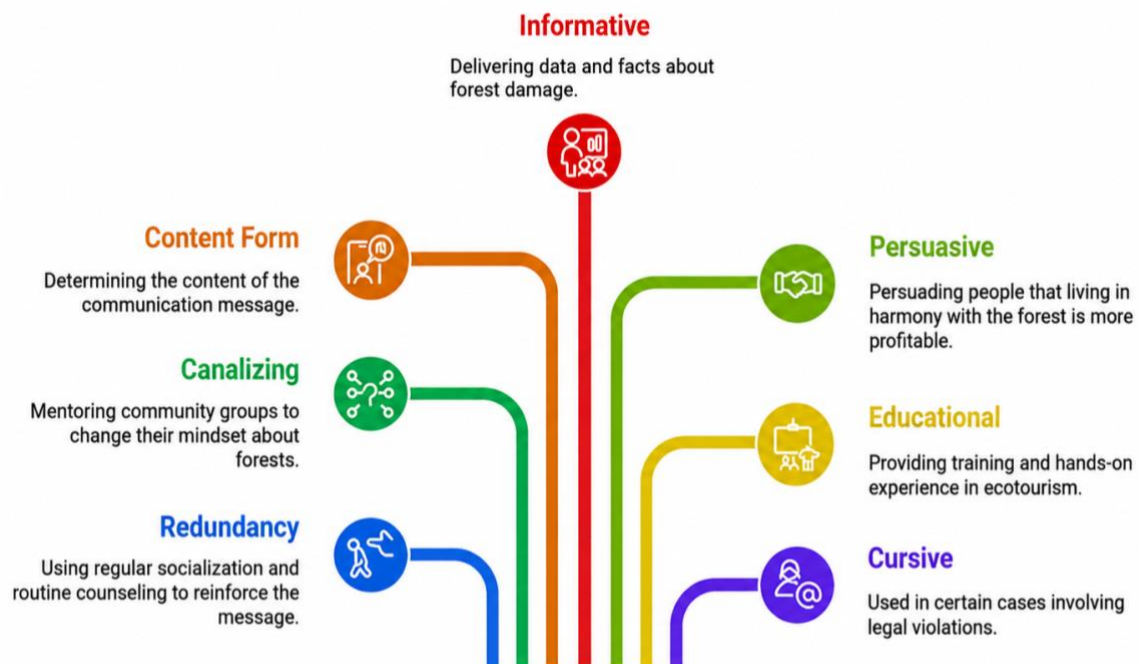


Figure 2. Model communication methods of Tesso Nilo forest.

The framework additionally positions corsifs as a mechanism of ultimate recourse, employed solely in instances of civil disorder. In practical terms, the application of legal force frequently constitutes a pivotal juncture that incites conflict, particularly when it is not preceded by an inclusive communicative process (Wolfgruber et al., 2022). Overall, this framework represents a valuable preliminary endeavor at delineating communication strategies; however, it remains significantly distant from a comprehensive participatory model. This framework necessitates revision through the incorporation of a dimension of dialogical communication, wherein society serves not only as a recipient of the message but also as a co-creator of meaning.

Conclusions. This research substantiates the assertion that the sustainability of management practices within the Tesso Nilo Area cannot be realized exclusively through ecological methodologies or technical regulations; rather, it is significantly contingent upon the caliber of participatory communication among stakeholders. The prevalence of top-down and reactive communication frameworks has engendered informational voids, a decline in trust, and concomitant community resistance to conservation initiatives. Local communities, despite their direct interaction with the estate, are frequently relegated to the status of passive recipients, rather than being recognized as strategic collaborators in environmental governance. As a result, human-animal conflicts and forest encroachment are perceived solely as ecological dilemmas, whereas their origins are rooted in the inadequacies of participatory communication. The results elucidate the considerable potential of social capital manifested through local figures, informal forums, and the intrinsic value of gotong royong as a cornerstone for an inclusive communication system. In light of this analysis, a Social Capital-Based Participatory Communication Model has been formulated, which is structured around three foundational pillars: (1) equitable information dissemination, (2) inclusive dialogue, and (3) collaborative decision-making. This model is contextually relevant and possesses the adaptability to be implemented in other regions. The limitations of the study include a geographic focus confined to three

villages, dependence on key informants, and an insufficient integration of gender analysis. Furthermore, the qualitative nature of the investigation constrains the generalizability of the findings. Future research trajectories should encompass longitudinal studies aimed at assessing the efficacy of long-term models, comparative analyses across various regions (such as Sumatra and Borneo), as well as an exploration of gender dynamics in environmental communication to ensure a wider scope of inclusivity.

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Conflict of Interest. The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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Authors:

Nurjanah Nurjanah (NN), Communication Science Study Program, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Riau, Steet HR Soebrantas KM 12, 28293, Pekanbaru, Indonesia, e-mail: nurjanah@lecturer.unri.ac.id

Tantri Puspita Yazid (TPY), Communication Science Study Program, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Riau, Steet HR Soebrantas KM 12, 28293, Pekanbaru, Indonesia, e-mail: tantripuspita.yazid@lecturer.unri.ac.id

Ismandianto Ismandianto (II), Communication Science Study Program, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Riau, Steet HR Soebrantas KM 12, 28293, Pekanbaru, Indonesia, e-mail: nurjanah@lecturer.unri.ac.id

Muchid Albintani (MA), Government Science Study Program, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Riau, Steet HR Soebrantas KM 12, 28293, Pekanbaru, Indonesia, e-mail: muchid@lecturer.unri.ac.id

Rusmadi Awza (RA), Communication Science Study Program, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Riau, Steet HR Soebrantas KM 12, Pekanbaru, 28293, Indonesia, e-mail: rusmadi.awza@lecturer.unri.ac.id

Muhammad Firdaus (MF), Communication Science Study Program, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Riau, Steet HR Soebrantas KM 12, 28293, Pekanbaru, Indonesia, e-mail: muhammad.firdaus@lecturer.unri.ac.id

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