

## **Social Space and Public Aspiration in Village Policy Process A Case Study in Peron Village, Limbangan, Kendal, Indonesia**

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### **Abstract**

Public aspirations are essential in policy formulation in an ideal political system. Especially at the village level in Indonesia, many researchers argue that with the implementation of village funds, the implementation of participation at the village level can better capture public aspirations. However, in reality, efforts to absorb public aspirations in a participatory manner experience many obstacles. One important suspicion is that this public space may not be a comfortable and safe public space for people to express their aspirations. By using a mix method, this research explores alternative explanations based on empirical data that people tend to use their own social space as a safe and comfortable space for aspirations.

Keywords: Social Space, Public Aspiration, Village Policy Process

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### **INTRODUCTION**

In early 2014, the Indonesian government enacted a new law regarding Villages. This law confirms that the Indonesian government has gone further in implementing decentralization since the fall of the New Order. One important reason for implementing decentralization in government is the hope that decentralization can increase public participation in government thereby encouraging the achievement of good governance (Haryanto, 2016). In addition, decentralization of government at the village level is expected to make it easier for local governments to capture public aspirations to encourage better and more targeted village development (Hadi et al., 2022; Sri rejeki, 2017).

Research on capturing public aspirations in order to formulate better policies in an ideal political system is abundant. Specifically in village level, many researchers contend that the introduction of village funds enhances participation at the village level, allowing for a more effective representation of public aspirations (Ba & Sancono, 2019; Darmi, 2016; Dwiningwarni & Amrulloh, 2020). One of activities that can be accommodate many public aspirations is a participative forum on development plan called *Musrenbang* (Daraba, 2017; Megawati &

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Rahman, 2018; Rahayuningsih & Arbayah, 2021). However, many studies show that the implementation of *Musrenbang* itself mostly can be considered failed to be participative and eventually cannot really capture many community's aspirations (Johanis E. Kaawoan, 2021; Kila, 2017; Purwaningsih, 2022). The challenges to *Musrenbang* revolve around the lack of role of the village government in encouraging community participation (Darmawan, 2020; Lainsamputti, 2021; M, 2019), sceptical communities (Darmawan, 2020), low level of awareness which is also influenced by the level of community education (Septiansyah & Setiawan, 2021). These studies show that there are more negative factors originating from society. This raises suspicion that public space such as *Musrenbang* may not be a comfortable and safe public space for people to express their aspirations.

On the other hand, in many villages in Indonesia, it is commonly known that people there have more solidarity and social coherence. One certain reason is that there are various social spaces in which they voluntarily gather and become socially active. These social spaces are created, perpetuated and participated in by the community itself (Lefebvre et al., 1997). Those then become more comfortable spaces for them to gather. Therefore, social spaces such as, community gatherings in *angkringan* or coffee shops, *majlis taklim*, *jamiyyah yasinan* or *dibaan*, community based security patrol, chats of young mothers waiting for their children to go to school and even organizational associations such as *Muslimat NU*, *Ansor*, *Aisyiah*, or other kinds of social group also have political potentials, one of which is that it can become an alternative space (from formal public space such as *Musrenbang*) where public aspirations are actually raised and talked (Lefebvre et al., 1997; Setiawan, 2017). Social space has deep potential to become an important part of community participation, where the community conveys and discusses issues and public interests as well as decisions and policies taken by the government (Siwalette et al., 2020). Eventually, social space can become a pivotal element in village governance and policy making because it nurtures effective public participation.

However, further research on social space and its relationship to public aspiration and public participation in policy making has not been explored and carried out in depth. Many research indeed suggest that community aspirations are needed for better village development (Hakim et al., 2017; Handayani, 2021) and can be accommodated by BPD, a village representative institution (Alam, 2019; Basuki, 2020; Handayani, 2021), and through

*Musrenbang* which are not yet fully participatory and have not utilized the full potential of public aspirations (Darmawan, 2020; DEWI, 2021; Rosmala Dewi, 2019). However, these studies have not yet separated itself from focusing on formal institutions in the village and public spaces provided by the government, which in reality are still not very effective. Informal village institutions such as the religious institution MWC NU (Lestariningsih et al., 2021), the youth organization Karang Taruna, (Ludovikus & Rio, 2019), community organizations such as tourism awareness groups (Wijaya & Zulkarnain, 2016), and Paser Berkerai Community (Yusuf Hidayat, 2022) are indeed discussed but not as an alternative social space. these studies leave out an important potential where social space can also act as a space for public aspirations. Thus, research on social space as a space for public aspirations becomes more important to research.

Therefore, this research seeks to fill the gap by not only to identify the social spaces in the village the community, but furthermore, to find out to what extent social spaces also function as spaces for public aspirations, a potential public participation mechanism within village governance and policy making. This research also aims to identify how far the community expresses their aspirations and participates in village development through platforms provided by the government. Thus, this research finally seeks to compare and draw useful insights regarding the effectiveness of capturing public aspirations through participatory activity platforms to support better village governance and policy making.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

This research used both qualitative and quantitative approach to better understand public aspiration and participation as well as the social spaces within the Peron Village, Limbangan, Kendal, Central Java. 34 respondents were selected using purposive random sampling to better represents some respondent's characteristics such as, gender, educational background, occupation, and position within the village structure. A closed questionnaire was used in the form of a checklist column to obtain a general picture type of social spaces and formal village meetings attended the Peron village community and whether they convey policy aspirations in those social gatherings or formal meetings. An in-dept interview with several informant was also used to deeply understand the dynamics of public aspirations in both social spaces and formal village meetings. Lastly, two focused group discussions were carried out to

deepen the understanding of how public aspirations are discussed. It further elaborated on not only the typical policy issues conveyed in both spaces but also factors contributing to the public aspiration dynamic in village policy making.

The qualitative data then analysed using simple descriptive analysis. The quantitative data analysis results in showing numbers of both social spaces and formal meetings attended and numbers of respondents conveying their aspirations in both spaces as well as several reasons behind it. The explanation of the data then complemented by the findings and explanations gained from both in-depth interview and focused group discussion.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

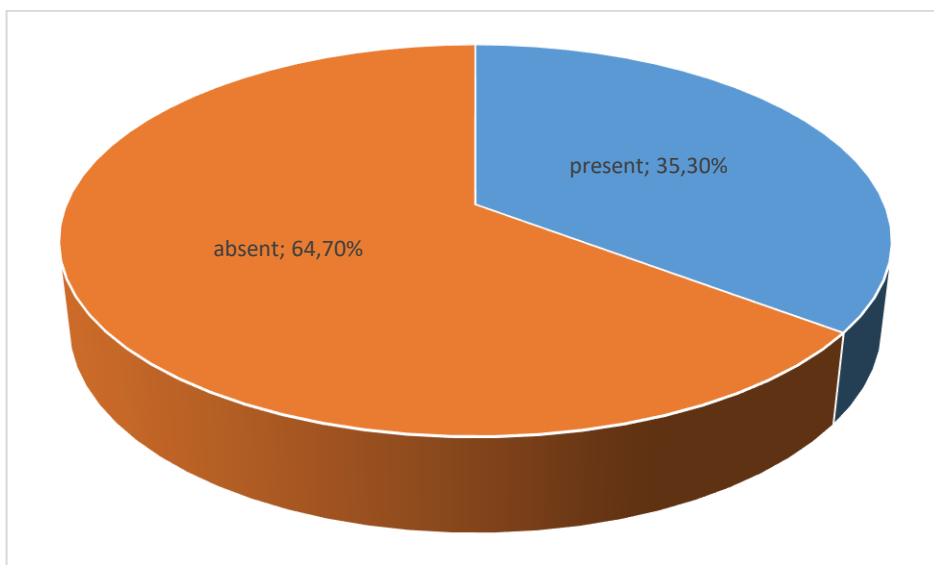
### **Public Attendance in Formal Forum and Social Space.**

Accommodating public aspirations through participative mechanisms has normatively been suggested in village governance and policymaking. Public participation in any level of governance is believed to have many advantages such as improved governance, better decision, informed and transparent decision making, as well as policy acceptance. In relation to democracy, accommodating aspirations through public participation can also nurture active citizens and enhance public legitimation over government and government's policies. Implementation of public participation at the village level is usually manifested in several forms. Firstly, there is a village representative body, called BPD, secondly, there is a semi-formal neighborhood community structure such as RT/RW, and thirdly there is a development planning forum called *Musrenbang* and other open official formal meetings. Eventually, all these forms of public participation were generally held in a formal forum.

A formal forum is a meeting that has a more structured and organized design than an informal forum. Formal forums are usually held because they have an agenda containing discussion points, and a scheduled time and place. Formal forums are usually led by a chairman who ensures that the activity runs smoothly. In this forum there is a special structure in charge of keeping the forum on track. Additionally, formal forums create a sense of professionalism, and importance that encourages participants to contribute to the success of the agenda through a sense of order, and clarity.

The formal forums in this discussion focus on formal meeting forums at the village government level, such as *Musrenbangdes*, community or hamlet community meetings,

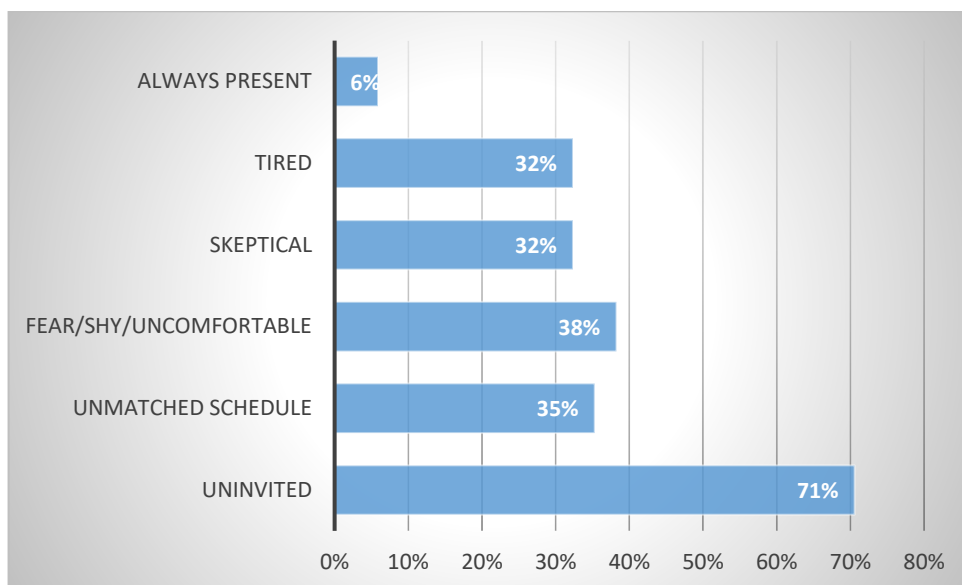
household meetings, and other meetings. Formal forums at the village government level are usually held to discuss phenomena, activities and development directions in the village. This activity, although it is basically open for general public, is usually attended by residents who receives an invitation letter to attend the formal forum agenda as a form of community participation in policy making in the village government. This research shows the percentage of attendance and community participation as follows:



**Figure 1. Attendance in Formal Forum**

The figure 1 is the result of a survey conducted in Peron Village, showing that only 35% of the community has attended formal forum activities provided by the village government, and 65% of the community have never participated in formal forum activities held by the village government. It can be concluded that the level of public attendance is quite low in formal forums which should be a place to convey and participate in taking a role in discussions on these formal forums.

In terms of formal village meeting attendance itself, the survey results show several reasons given by respondents regarding their absence from formal forums in the village.



**Figure 2. Reason for not attending formal forum**

The data in figure 2 shows that the community in general (71%) was not invited to attend village meeting and only 6% who always attend the formal forum. This means that a village meeting which is supposed to be open for public does not seem to be ‘public’ for the public. Further, there were 35% respondents who said that the forum did not match or coincided with other activities. This can be explained by the majority of residents’ occupation is farmer or seller and the forum is usually hold on their working hours. Other reasons should not be left unnoticed; 38% of respondents felt afraid, embarrassed and even thought that the meeting room was uncomfortable as one of the informants said

“... it feels unethical to attend something that we are not invited in it, even if we are invited, I don’t think I would attend, because a commoner like me will be unheard and will not make a difference, I personally feel shy to attend that kind of forum...”

The quote also emphasizes the 32% of respondents feeling useless to attend the meeting because their opinions were not responded to or not being followed up.

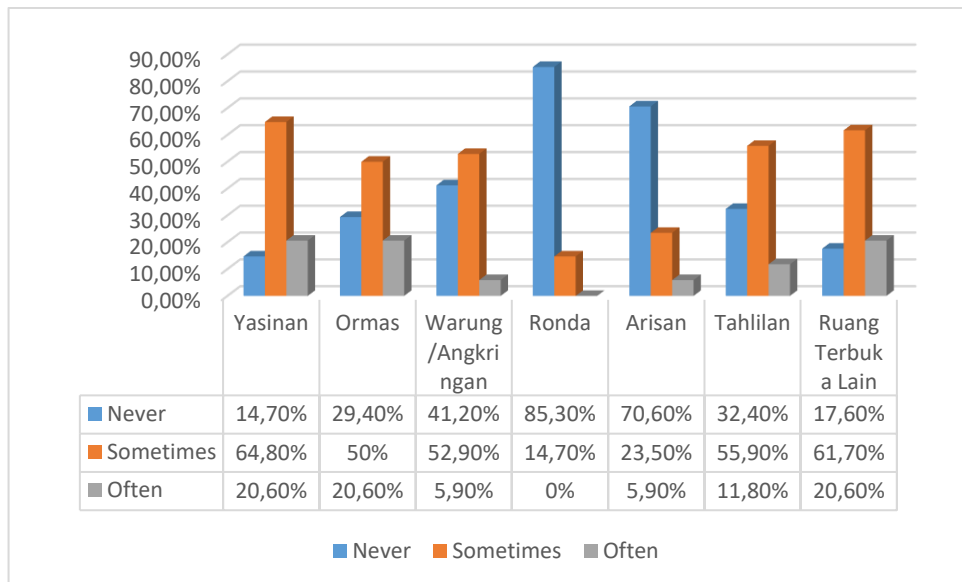
Eventually, these data show that public participation in village policy making has not achieving the ideal proportion. Village governance that supposedly embraces public by being more open to their aspirations turns out to be challenged by the fact that the formal village forums and meetings are not necessarily an open, comfortable and safe public space for everyone.

Contrary to the formal forums in the village , general data in the following table 1 shows that 100 percent of respondents visited different social spaces.

**Table 1. Attendance in social space**

Public Presence	Percentage
Present	100,0
Absent	0,0
Total	100,0

The Table 1 demonstrates that every respondent attended at least one of the social space available in the village. Although, not all social spaces are attended by every respondent. In details, the following Figure 3 shows the variety of social spaces attended by respondents.



**Figure 3. Social Spaces Attended**

It can be seen from the figure 3, that most respondents attended religious activities such as *Yasinan and Tahlilan* and even religion-based community organizations such as NU or Muhammadiyah. Meanwhile, attendance on economy-based group such as *Arisan*, conversation at *Warung* is relatively small, as such the attendance on *Ronda* (a community-based security patrol).

The data emphasizes that social spaces in the village holds an important role in gathering people. This is a culturally available social capital that have political potentials. People voluntarily come to those meetings and normatively considered to be a duty to come as a

member of the community as one informant said “... I feel really bad if I could not attend, I feel like I am too ignorant as I live in village society... people here have a kind of solidarity...”. Therefore, people in the village will tend to attend social spaces far more than typical formal village forums. Social spaces, in the end, could potentially support in achieving a more effective village governance by at least being a space where they can discuss their aspirations.

### **Comparing Public Opinion Expression in Formal Forum and Social Spaces**

Regarding conveying aspirations in formal village forums, the following data explains whether each respondent who attended a formal forum, whatever the form, ever spoke in that formal forum. From 35% of respondents who attended the formal forum, the following table shows the percentage of those who expressed their opinions on the forum.

**Table 2. Speaking Up in Formal Forums**

Speaking Up in Formal Forums	Percent
Never speak up	67,6
Speak up	32,4
Total	100,0

The Table 2 shows that the percentage of the Peron village community who did speak up in formal forums is still relatively low, making up to 67.6%. Only 32.4% of respondents who did speak up in the forums. Which means only around 11% of respondents who actually did express their opinions in the forum. Village officials would certainly claim that public participation is in place because of their presence, even though they, in essence, choose not to make relevant contributions, explain their views clearly, and be involved in discussions that lead to decision making. In the end, most respondents chose not to attempt to convey opinions, ideas or input in a structured and formal manner in the context of official meetings or meetings.

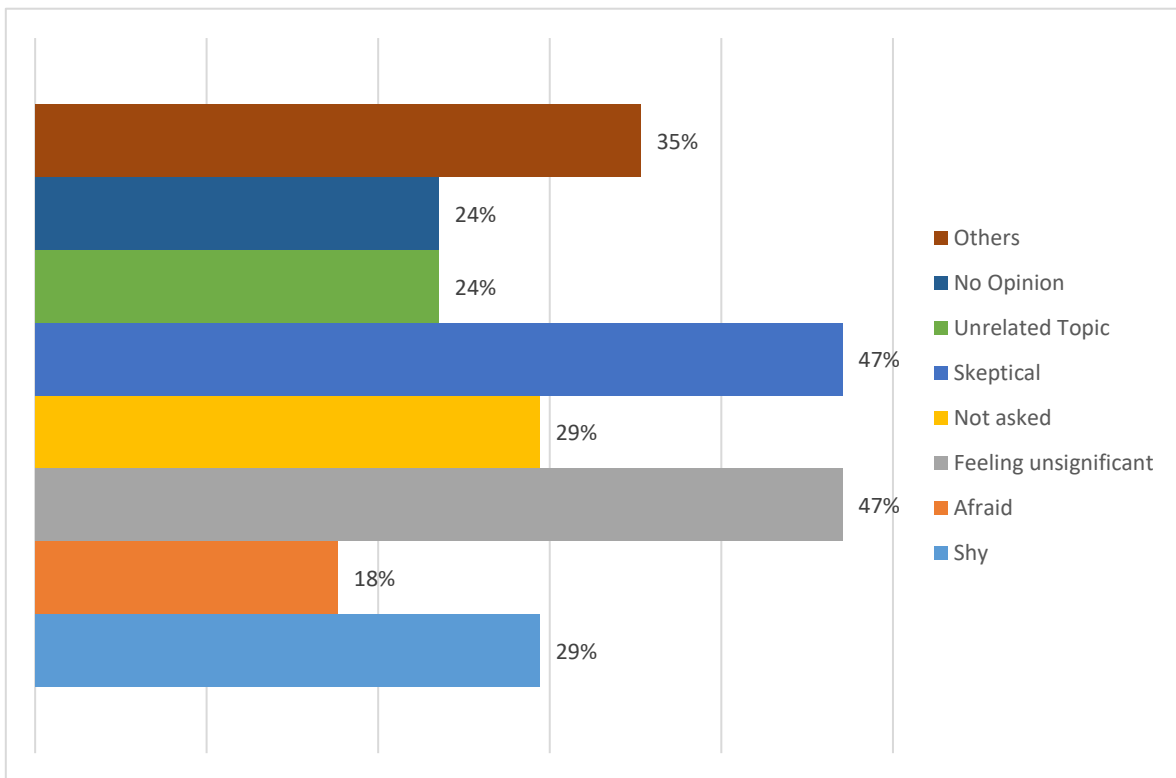
On the other hand, as shown in table 3, around 85 percent of the total respondents found that they had discussed development policy issues in different social spaces. This is of course based on their closeness and comfort in discussing policy issues which are basically an outpouring of aspirations that are not conveyed in formal forums.



**Table 3. Aspirations in the Social Space**

Speaking Up in Social Space	Percentage
Never	14,7
Speak up	85,3
Total	100,0

This further confirms that discussing aspirations in social spaces is more popular and preferable than conveying aspirations in formal forums (table 3). In line with this, people are not encouraged to voice their opinions in formal forums due to several reasons as shown in the following figure 4:



**Figure 4. Reasons for not expressing opinion in formal forums**

The data above shows that the majority of respondents consider that their opinions are not important in village meeting forums (47%) and assume that expressing opinions is useless for various reasons (47%), one of which is not being followed up. Other reasons such as the feeling of uncomfortability (29%) and fear (18%) are also worth mentioning. Focused Group Discussion (FGD) data also shows that most participants agreed that they were more present in informal spaces in society such as routines, *tahlilan*, informal community gatherings, etc.

Related to using the opportunity to talk in these spaces. Most participants also took the opportunity to speak in informal spaces rather than formal ones. Formal spaces are only used as places to receive information rather than discussions. What was surprising was that in the FGD session, the neighbourhood head (*Ketua RT*) explained that he also felt the same way. In the informal gathering, he feels more like in power, because he has a lot of information. However, when present in a formal space in the village or hamlet, as he said "...I feel like I am not important, shy, and I think that other people know better...". These feelings were also confirmed by the other FGD participants. Village formal meetings for him was more like a briefing in which he, like the others, receives more information and commands from village apparatus.

In an in-depth discussion regarding the reasons for openness in these speech spaces, everyone in the FGD forum answered and agreed that informal spaces in society are comfortable places to express many things, from trivial matters to serious opinions. Meanwhile, in formal village spaces, there are power relations that operate, fear, shame, feeling unintelligent, feeling insignificant, and the thought that their voices are not that important, and there is no effect from speaking. Meanwhile, in an informal space, they feel more comfortable, because there is a closeness to knowing each other, a relaxed conversation frame, and feeling equal to others.

The results of discussions in special FGD with Peron Village youths also show the same challenges in formal forums. Formally, youth tend to take part in activities at RT and RW meetings especially their own youth organization meeting. Unfortunately, it is also discovered that the youth organization at village level was no longer running. Some of activities that are often attended by youth in at the RT and RW levels are the preparation meeting for the 17 August event, the monthly youth organization meeting at the RW level, and the work program planning meeting at the RW level. At those meetings, most FGD participants claimed that they had voiced their aspirations in it, but their voices were not heard, giving rise to doubts about making suggestions through the forum.

Then in informal social spaces, young people tend to actively participate in various spaces such as sports gatherings, *selapanan/yasinan*, *stalls*, *angkruk*, and playing mobile legends. Of these spaces, they are actually more inclined to give or express their aspirations for sports. Youths feel more comfortable and safer to discuss their concerns and convey their

aspirations in informal sports spaces. The reason is that they are more active in participating in sports every day with their peers, such as soccer, volleyball and futsal. In other words, they feel more connected to other youths in their own gatherings rather than in formal forums or in informal but general forums.

Eventually, voicing out aspirations needs a comfortable and safe place. The complicated power relation between the village residents and the village government makes them feel unease. This makes the public participation mechanism in the village governance and policy making is not effective, because there is an existing significant gap hampering them from fundamentally involved in village decision making. Consequently, people choose to discuss their aspirations in their own comfortable spaces which are called social space.

Therefore, social spaces' discussion could mean two things. Firstly, it can imply that the existing official public space is not effective in facilitating public participation. Secondly, it can also mean that social space could potentially be used as an alternative space where people can freely voice out their opinions. Village government should use this opportunity by approaching those social spaces and become closer to people they govern and serve. In other words, public apparatus should blend in with the people and involve themselves in a more comfortable 'little talk' with them.

## **CONCLUSION**

Overall, this research shows that village citizens actually do have aspirations regarding policy issues especially in term of village development. Regardless of the level of formal education received by the community, they have sufficient insight and knowledge to have certain aspirations and views regarding development policy issues in the village. Their insight and knowledge are as good and valid as the views of people with a higher level of formal education. Furthermore, this research also shows that village communities have sufficient concern and time to discuss development policy issues, especially those in the village. However, the dynamics of the relationship between officials and village residents is what creates less comfort and security so that the community takes part in development policy processes in the village. They just do not have enough power to deliver their aspirations in formal village meetings due to some reasons and limitations. Instead, they discussed the policy issues in their social spaces which are considered more comfortable and safer. This research

at least negates the general view of many studies assuming that the lack of public participation is due to village community's less formal education and scepticism of development policy issues.

The findings in this research are not aimed to theoretically explains factors of public aspirations, rather, it demonstrates the phenomena descriptively that the village policy process is hampered by the lack of public participating by conveying their aspirations. Again, due to some reasons, public aspirations are less discussed in formal village meetings. Therefore, public policy process especially in Indonesian villages should consider social spaces as the alternative venues to harvest public aspirations. Village leaders and policymakers should facilitate a more effective and inclusive policy process by taking more public aspirations. Public officials need to take off their power label and dive into community's social spaces to understand public better. Thus, a more ideal village policy process with more public participating in it will be achieved.

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