



THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN BUILDING SOCIAL HARMONY IN THE MIDST OF CULTURAL DIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the role, challenges, and opportunities of civil society in fostering social harmony within multicultural societies. The research employs a qualitative approach with a socio-legal design and multiple case studies involving several civil society organizations operating in culturally diverse regions. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis of organizational reports and related policies. The findings reveal that civil society plays a crucial role as a facilitator of intergroup dialogue, a promoter of multicultural education, a mediator of social conflicts, and an advocate for inclusive public policies. Community dialogue programs, digital literacy initiatives, and interfaith collaborations have contributed to strengthening social trust and reducing intergroup prejudice. Nevertheless, efforts to build social harmony face significant challenges, including identity polarization, digital misinformation, socio-economic inequality, limited organizational capacity, and uneven policy support. Conversely, growing youth openness, constructive use of digital technology, cross-community networking, and policy initiatives promoting religious moderation present valuable opportunities. The study concludes that social harmony is a continuous process requiring multidimensional strategies and collaboration among civil society, government institutions, and local communities to ensure inclusive and sustainable social cohesion.

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ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis peran, tantangan, dan peluang civil society dalam membangun harmoni sosial di tengah keberagaman budaya. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain socio-legal dan studi kasus multipel pada sejumlah organisasi masyarakat sipil di wilayah multikultural. Data diperoleh melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi partisipatif, dan analisis dokumen organisasi serta kebijakan terkait. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa civil society

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berperan sebagai fasilitator dialog lintas identitas, agen edukasi multikultural, mediator konflik sosial, serta advokator kebijakan inklusif. Program dialog komunitas, literasi digital, dan kolaborasi lintas agama terbukti meningkatkan kepercayaan sosial dan mengurangi prasangka antar kelompok. Namun, pembangunan harmoni sosial menghadapi tantangan berupa polarisasi identitas, disinformasi digital, ketimpangan sosial-ekonomi, keterbatasan kapasitas organisasi, dan dukungan kebijakan yang belum merata. Di sisi lain, meningkatnya keterbukaan generasi muda, pemanfaatan teknologi digital secara positif, penguatan jejaring lintas komunitas, serta dukungan kebijakan moderasi beragama menjadi peluang strategis. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa harmoni sosial merupakan proses berkelanjutan yang memerlukan pendekatan multidimensional dan sinergi antara civil society, pemerintah, serta masyarakat lokal untuk memastikan kohesi sosial yang inklusif dan berkelanjutan

Kata kunci:

Civil Society; Harmoni Sosial; Masyarakat Multikultural; Kohesi Sosial; Dialog Lintas Budaya

INTRODUCTION

Multicultural society is an inevitable social reality in the life of modern nations, especially in Indonesia, which is known as a country with a very high level of ethnic, religious, linguistic, and cultural diversity. Data from the [Central Statistics Agency \(2023\)](#) shows that Indonesia has more than 1,300 ethnic groups and six official religions that people adhere to, with a demographic composition spread across more than 17,000 islands. This diversity is a large social capital, but at the same time it has the potential to cause social friction if it is not managed through an inclusive integration mechanism. In this context, social harmony cannot be understood simply as the absence of conflict, but rather as a dynamic condition characterized by mutual recognition, tolerance, participation, and social justice among different groups ([Putnam, 2021](#)).

Socio-political developments in the last five years show that multicultural societies face new challenges in the form of identity polarization, digital disinformation, and the strengthening of identity politics. Reports from various research institutions show that the digital space is often an arena for the dissemination of exclusive narratives that can sharpen religious and cultural differences ([Lim, 2022](#)). On the other hand, the Indonesian Democracy Index and various national surveys on tolerance indicate fluctuations in the level of social tolerance in a number of regions, which shows that social cohesion is not yet fully evenly distributed ([Setara Institute, 2024](#)). This condition shows that cultural diversity requires strengthening the space for dialogue and public participation so that it does not develop into social segregation.

In this situation, civil society has a strategic position as a non-state actor who bridges the interests of society and the state. Civil society includes civil society organizations, non-governmental organizations, religious organizations, indigenous communities, and advocacy networks that play a role in building collective awareness and citizen participation. Recent studies show that the existence of a strong civil society is positively correlated with improving the quality of democracy, protecting minority rights, and strengthening social solidarity ([Edwards, 2022](#)). In the context of a multicultural society, civil society functions as a mediation space that allows cross-identity interactions to take place constructively and deliberatively.

In Indonesia, the role of civil society can be seen in various initiatives of interfaith dialogue, multicultural education, advocacy for the rights of vulnerable groups, and strengthening religious moderation. The [annual report of Komnas Perempuan \(2024\)](#) notes that collaboration between civil society organizations and state institutions contributes to increasing public awareness of the issues of gender-based violence and social discrimination. In addition, a number of studies show that moderate religious organizations and local communities have a significant

contribution to preventing horizontal conflicts through dialogical and local wisdom-based approaches (Rahman & Hidayat, 2023). This emphasizes that social harmony in the midst of cultural diversity depends not only on state regulations, but also on the active participation of civil society.

However, the effectiveness of civil society in building social harmony also faces various structural and cultural obstacles. Restrictions on civil space, limited resources, and inequality of access to education and information are factors that can reduce the capacity of civil society organizations to carry out their roles optimally (CIVICUS, 2023). In addition, a paternalistic culture and strong sense of identity in some communities can hinder the process of inclusive dialogue. Therefore, it is necessary to strengthen the institutional capacity of civil society as well as support policies that guarantee freedom of association and opinion as a prerequisite for participatory democracy.

Theoretically, the role of civil society in a multicultural society can be explained through the concept of deliberative public space that emphasizes the importance of rational dialogue between citizens to achieve social consensus (Habermas, 2021). In this perspective, civil society is an arena for the formation of critical public opinion as well as a vehicle for citizen political education. Meanwhile, social capital theory emphasizes that networks of trust and cross-group cooperation contribute to social stability and sustainable development (Putnam, 2021). The integration of these two perspectives shows that civil society is not only an advocacy actor, but also an agent of social transformation that builds bridges between identities.

Thus, the study of the role of civil society in building social harmony in the midst of cultural diversity becomes relevant and urgent. This study aims to analyze the concrete contribution of civil society organizations in strengthening social cohesion, identify the supporting and inhibiting factors that support and inhibit the effectiveness of this role, and formulate strategies for strengthening civil society as a pillar of social integration. Through an analytical approach based on data and the latest literature, this article is expected to make a theoretical and practical contribution to the development of inclusive public policies and the strengthening of multicultural democracy in Indonesia.

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with socio-legal design and case studies to analyze the role of civil society in building social harmony in the midst of cultural diversity. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows researchers to understand in depth the social dynamics, inter-stakeholder interactions, and meanings constructed by civil society organizations in practice. Meanwhile, the socio-legal approach is used to see the relationship between formal regulations on freedom of association, public participation, and diversity management and the reality of their implementation in social life. Thus, this study not only examines normative aspects, but also explores the concrete practices of civil society in building dialogue and social cohesion.

The research design used was a multiple case study of several civil society organizations active in interfaith dialogue programs, multicultural education, advocacy for minority rights, or strengthening religious moderation. Case selection is carried out purposively based on the following criteria: (1) the organization has a real program related to strengthening social harmony; (2) operating in areas with a high level of diversity; and (3) have a track record of activities for at least the last three years. The case study approach allows for an in-depth analysis of the strategies, intervention methods, and social impacts generated by each organization.

The data sources in this study consist of primary data and secondary data. Primary data was obtained through in-depth interviews with civil society organizations, community leaders, and local government representatives involved in collaborative programs. In addition,

participatory observations are carried out on dialogue, training, or community forum activities organized by civil society. Secondary data was obtained through document studies, such as the organization's annual report, government policies related to diversity management, and scientific publications of the last five years relevant to the theme of civil society and multicultural society.

Data collection techniques were carried out through semi-structured interviews, observations, and documentation. Semi-structured interviews allow for flexibility in exploring the informant's experiences and perspectives on the challenges and strategies for building social harmony. Observations were made to understand the dynamics of interaction between groups in activities facilitated by civil society. Documentation is used to analyze the consistency between the organization's vision, work program, and implementation impact in the field.

Data analysis is carried out qualitatively with the stages of data reduction, categorization, data presentation, and conclusion drawn. Data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach to identify strategy patterns, forms of participation, as well as supporting and inhibiting factors for the role of civil society. The validity of the data is maintained through the triangulation technique of sources and methods, namely comparing the results of interviews, observations, and written documents. With this method, the research is expected to be able to provide a comprehensive overview of the effectiveness and challenges of the role of civil society in building social harmony in a multicultural society.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. The Role of Civil Society in Building Social Harmony in the Midst of Cultural Diversity

Based on the results of qualitative research with a socio-legal approach and multiple case studies on a number of civil society organizations (CSOs) in areas with high levels of diversity, it was found that civil society plays a strategic and layered role in building social harmony. The findings show that this role is not only normative as a promoter of tolerance, but also transformative in shaping new patterns of social relations that are more inclusive. This role includes facilitative, educational, advocate, mediative, and community-based social network functions. This result is in line with [Edwards \(2022\)](#) who emphasized that civil society functions as a space for the formation of social solidarity as well as a driver of participatory democracy.

a. Civil Society as a Facilitator of Dialogue and Cross-Identity Interaction

Field findings show that most CSOs prioritize interfaith and cultural dialogue programs as the main strategy to build harmony. Dialogue is carried out through community forums, thematic discussions, interfaith holiday commemorations, and collaboration on social activities such as community service and humanitarian assistance. Observations show that these regular interactions increase mutual understanding and reduce negative stereotypes between groups. This approach is consistent with the theory of deliberative public space that emphasizes the importance of rational communication in building social consensus ([Habermas, 2021](#)).

In addition, informal dialogues, such as visits between houses of worship or interfaith youth forums, have proven to be more effective in building emotional closeness than rigid formal forums. This shows that social harmony is built through continuous interpersonal relationships, not just through symbolic ceremonies.

b. Civil Society as a Multicultural Education and Literacy Agent

The second finding shows that CSOs are active in tolerance education, especially for the younger generation and students. Programs such as religious moderation training, diversity schools, and anti-hoax digital campaigns contribute to increasing critical awareness of diversity issues. Interviews with program participants showed a shift in perspective from an exclusive attitude towards the acceptance of differences as a social necessity.

In the context of the digital era, CSOs also use social media to spread a narrative of peace and counter-discrimination. This strategy is relevant to the findings of Lim (2022) who affirm that digital literacy is an important instrument in reducing identity polarization in the online space. Thus, civil society plays a role as a preventive agent against disinformation-based conflicts.

c. Civil Society as a Mediator and Manager of Social Conflict

Other findings suggest that CSOs often function as mediators when social tensions occur, especially in regions with a history of communal conflict. Through a participatory approach and based on local wisdom, CSOs facilitate meetings between community leaders to find peaceful solutions. This approach has proven to be effective because CSOs are considered more neutral than formal state apparatus.

In some cases, CSOs also provide post-conflict assistance through social reconciliation and trust restoration programs. This strengthens the argument that civil society plays a role as a bridge builder in a multicultural society (Putnam, 2021).

d. Civil Society as an Advocate for Inclusive Policy

The findings of the study show that CSOs are not only moving at the grassroots level, but are also active in advocating for public policies that support social inclusion. For example, participation in interfaith communication forums, the drafting of tolerance-based regional regulations, and the supervision of discriminatory policies.

Collaboration between CSOs and local governments has been proven to increase the effectiveness of social harmony programs. However, the study also found that the success of advocacy is strongly influenced by the openness of civic space and local political support. CIVICUS (2023) notes that open civic space correlates with increased community participation in the policy-making process.

e. Civil Society as a Social Capital Booster and Community Network

Another important finding is the role of civil society in building cross-community networks that strengthen social capital. This network creates solidarity based on common interests, such as environmental issues, economic empowerment, or education. Through these collaborative activities, group identity is no longer the main barrier, but part of a diversity that complements each other.

In the perspective of social capital theory, the existence of networks and cross-group beliefs contributes to social stability and community cohesion (Putnam, 2021). This study found that areas with intensive CSO activities showed higher levels of social participation and cross-identity interaction than regions with minimal CSO activities.

Role	Dimensions	Program Form	Identified Impacts
Facilitator	Dialogue	Interfaith forums, shared social activities	Increased trust and communication between groups
Educator		Tolerance training, digital literacy	Decreased stereotypes and polarization
Conflict Mediators		Reconciliation facilitation and mentoring	Restoration of post-conflict social relations
Policy Advocate		Participation in regulatory formulation	More inclusive and participatory policies
Social Capital Booster		Cross-community networking	Increasing social cohesion and solidarity

Table 1. Summary of Research Findings

Based on these findings, it can be concluded that civil society plays a key role in building social harmony through a multidimensional approach. Social harmony does not only result from formal regulation, but from sustainable social interaction, education of

the value of tolerance, and the strengthening of networks of trust. The role of civil society is becoming increasingly important amid the increasing complexity of multicultural societies and the challenges of digital polarization.

Nevertheless, the study also found a number of challenges, such as limited resources, resistance to exclusive groups, and reliance on external donor support. Therefore, strengthening organizational capacity and synergy with the government is an important factor in ensuring the sustainability of the role of civil society. Overall, these results and discussions confirm that civil society is not just a complement to the state, but a strategic actor that builds a space for dialogue, solidarity, and social integration in the midst of cultural diversity.

2. Challenges and Opportunities in Building Social Harmony in the Midst of Cultural Diversity

Behind these challenges, the study also found a number of significant strategic opportunities.

First, increasing the awareness of the younger generation of the value of tolerance and diversity is an important social capital. The diversity and digital literacy training program showed a positive impact on changing participants' attitudes. Young people tend to be more open to cross-identity dialogue and more adaptive to collaborative approaches.

Second, digital technology, which was previously a source of polarization, can also be used as a means of spreading peaceful narratives. CSOs that actively produce educational content, interfaith dialogue videos, and anti-hoax campaigns have proven to be able to reach a wider audience and expand their influence beyond the boundaries of the local community.

Third, the existence of moderate religious and traditional leaders is a great opportunity in building social legitimacy. In a specific case study, the involvement of local figures was able to reduce resistance and increase community participation in dialogue forums. This culturally based legitimacy strengthens the effectiveness of CSO interventions.

Fourth, the support of national policies on religious moderation and strengthening diversity opens up space for collaboration between civil society and the government. Several CSOs have successfully partnered with government agencies in the preparation of tolerance training programs and interfaith communication forums.

Fifth, increasing public attention to the issue of social inclusion and the rights of vulnerable groups creates a stronger advocacy momentum. CSOs have the opportunity to expand the social harmony agenda by including issues of gender equality, minority protection, and social justice as part of the diversity narrative.

Aspects	Challenge	Opportunities
Socio-Cultural	Identity polarization and ideological resistance	The younger generation is more inclusive and adaptive
Economy	Social inequality fuels jealousy	Integration of economic programs and social dialogue
Digital	Disinformation and hate speech	Peaceful digital campaign and media literacy
Institutional	Limitations of CSO capacity	Strengthening networks and cross-sector collaboration
Policy	Government support is uneven	Religious moderation and social inclusion policies

Table 2. Summary of Findings of Challenges and Opportunities

Based on the findings of the research, challenges and opportunities in building social harmony do not stand separately, but are intertwined in the social dynamics of a multicultural society. Social harmony is proven not to be just the result of administratively managed diversity,

but is a social construct formed through interaction, negotiation, and value transformation in a sustainable manner. Civil society is an important actor in this process because it is positioned between the state and society, so it has the flexibility to reach the grassroots while influencing public policy.

The polarization of identity found in the study suggests that cultural diversity can turn into a source of fragmentation when politicized or constructed exclusively. In interviews, some informants stated that identity sentiment increased especially at a certain political momentum. This shows that social harmony is very vulnerable to political instrumentality. This polarization is exacerbated by the uncontrolled flow of digital information, where provocative narratives spread faster than moderate messages. Sociologically, this phenomenon shows the weakening of the public deliberative space that should be an arena for rational and inclusive discussion.

Furthermore, the socio-economic inequalities found in the case studies show that identity conflicts are often rooted in the issue of resource distribution. Cultural identity in this context becomes a symbol of the mobilization of discontent. Therefore, social harmony is not enough to be built through symbolic dialogue, but it is necessary to touch on aspects of welfare and social justice. These findings reinforce the understanding that social cohesion has a structural, not just cultural, dimension. When economic disparities are not addressed, cross-cultural dialogue has the potential to become a formality with no substantive impact.

The limited capacity of civil society organizations is also a significant challenge. CSOs working with limited resources often struggle to maintain program sustainability. Some dialogue programs that were initially effective stagnated when funding support ended. This shows that the development of social harmony requires a long-term approach and institutional investment. Without strengthening managerial capacity, mediation training, and network development, the role of civil society becomes vulnerable to fluctuations in external support.

The ideological resistance of certain groups also shows that social harmony touches sensitive dimensions of belief. In some cases, interfaith dialogue is rejected because it is considered to blur the boundaries of identity. This condition confirms that the strategy of building harmony must consider an approach based on local wisdom and the legitimacy of community leaders. Without the support of trusted figures, CSO interventions can be perceived as an external agenda.

Behind these challenges, this research finds strategic opportunities that provide hope for strengthening social harmony. One of the main opportunities is the increasing openness of the younger generation to the value of diversity. The diversity training program shows a change in the attitude of participants that is more inclusive and dialogical. The younger generation tends to have a cosmopolitan orientation and is open to cross-identity interactions. This is an important social capital for the long term.

Digital technology, which was previously a source of polarization, can also be used as an instrument of social transformation. CSOs that actively produce educational content and peaceful narratives are able to create alternative spaces that balance the flow of negative information. This shows that digital media is value-neutral; Its effectiveness depends on how it is used. When CSOs master digital communication strategies, the impact of the program can be significantly expanded.

Another significant opportunity is national and local policy support for the agenda of religious moderation and diversity. In areas with inclusive leadership, collaboration between CSOs and governments results in more structured and far-reaching programs. This synergy shows that social harmony requires a collaborative, not competitive, approach between the state and civil society.

In addition, strengthening cross-community networks has been proven to increase social trust. When CSOs build collaboration based on common issues such as the environment,

education, or the creative economy, cross-identity interactions become more natural and less burdened by ideological symbolism. This shows that pragmatic cooperation can be the gateway to building deeper solidarity.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the research and discussion, it can be concluded that the development of social harmony in the midst of cultural diversity is a complex and dynamic process, which is influenced by the interaction between social, economic, cultural, and institutional factors. Civil society has proven to play a strategic role as a facilitator of cross-identity dialogue, a multicultural education agent, a mediator of social conflict, and an advocate of inclusive policies. Through a dialogical, educational, and collaborative approach, civil society organizations are able to build interaction spaces that encourage mutual understanding and strengthen trust between groups in a multicultural society.

However, the effectiveness of these roles is inseparable from various challenges, such as identity polarization, digital disinformation, socio-economic inequality, limited organizational capacity, and uneven policy support. These challenges show that social harmony is not enough to be built through a symbolic approach, but rather requires an integrative and sustainable strategy. Opportunities such as increasing the openness of the younger generation, the positive use of digital technology, strengthening cross-community networks, and supporting inclusive policies—are important capital to strengthen social cohesion.

Thus, social harmony in the midst of cultural diversity can only be realized through synergy between civil society, government, and the wider community. Civil society needs to strengthen institutional capacity, develop adaptive strategies for social change, and integrate dialogue approaches, economic empowerment, and digital literacy in its programs. Social harmony is not a static condition, but rather a process of continuous transformation that demands a collective commitment to nurturing diversity as a common strength.

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