The Situational Theory of the Publics in an Ethnography Research: Identifying Public Response to Crisis Management

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Abstract

The public is important in public relations practices and is the ultimate target of a public relations program. Considering the public's needs and interests, especially in a crisis situation, the company is able to foster a mutual understanding with its public. The research tries to depict the public response to crisis management, include the communication behaviors and the situational perceptions of the villagers, one of the external public, as the variables of the Situational Theory of the Public during the mudflow crisis in Indonesia. Although this theory has often been overlooked, it has not been applied to explore the public'sresponse to the crisis management during the mudflow crisis in Indonesia, particularly by using an ethnography method. The research outlined clearly that the public were aware and active public. As a result of these characteristics, this research revealed a model of communication flow among the victims.

Keywords: Situational Theory of the Public, crisis management, public relations, ethnography.

1. Introduction

The research applied an ethnography method to explore the villagers' response to crisis management during the mudflow crisis in Indonesia. Hence, the researcher is able to depict the communication behaviors and situational perception of the villagers as mentioned in Grunig's the Situational Theory of the Public (Grunig, 1979; Grunig & Hunt, 1984): whether the villagers recognize the problems which happened or not, whether they perceived the situation as a constraint or not, and whether they had a high involvement or not. These variables are important to identify group of public. By identifying the public, Public relations will be able to develop a strategic management to support the organization's goals to deal with the crisis. Grunig&Repper(2008) said that the first step in strategic management is to identify and classify the public who affects or is affected by the organization. By communicating with the public, public relations programs will be accordance with the public's needs to provide the opportunity to maintain good relations between the organization and its public. Furthermore, the area of Public relations itself involves crisis management and determining the public perceptions. Public relations must identify how the public responds to the messages that public relations convey by understanding what the public know (cognitive), believe, and perceive about the information which it receives (Galloway & Kwansah-Aidoo, 2005).

The mudflow has been occurring since 29th of May 2006 and the center of eruption is 200 m from Lapindo's drilling activity in Sidoarjo, Indonesia. The hot mud mixed with gas was initially small in volume and was not considered dangerous. However, to date, it has still not been restricted completely and 70 thousand cubic meters flows out per day. After 6 years, it has become a lake of mud and has submerged 12 villages. Since the first eruption, it compelled more than 60,000 villagers to leave their homes and to move to temporary shelter camps or to stay with their relatives(Kriyantono, 2012). For LapindoInc (owned by Bakrie Group), the oil company that was perceived by the villagers as the main cause of the disaster, this situation has challenged them to handle the crisis properly. Therefore, it is interesting to know how the company deals with this crisis and how the villagers perceive it. Any efforts to deal with the crisis had effect on the public. By using an ethnography method, the research enriches the study in public relations area.

It can enhance the understanding of public relations practitioners in this field, and the villagers' response to crisis. Due to its ordinary impact, the mudflow crisis has attracted many scholars to do research about it from different aspects. Novenanto(2009a, 2009b)focused on the role of the media in mediating this event; Suryandaru(2010) systematically explored the frame of mass media. These research found that media that affiliate to Bakrie Group tended to shape positive frames to Lapindo; Utomo(2009) focused on the public policy; and Batubara (2009)investigated the dispute about cause of the mudflow eruption; Kriyantono(2012) also conducted an ethnography research to measure the company reputation during crisis by applying the Situational Crisis Communication Theory.

2. *The Situational Theory of the Public*

The Situational Theory of the Public assumes that public behaviour changes easily and the change will depend on two factors such as the situation and the opportunity to discuss it with others (Grunig, 1979). This theory was developed based on Dewey's idea about the evolution of the public. Dewey (cited in Grunig, 1979), theorized that there are three steps of the public's evolution; firstly, having a similar problem; secondly, recognizing the problem, and thirdly, giving a response to a particular action. As a result of this evolution, there are three types of public: a latent public, an aware public, and an active public. The latent public is a group that all have the same problem but cannot identify and describe the problem. However, if a group is familiar with a problem it becomes an aware public. The active public is a group which discusses and responds (using opinions or actions) to the situation (Grunig, 1979; Grunig & Hunt, 1984). This theory explains two variables of communication behaviors: information seeking and information processing. Information seeking happens if someone actively searches for information, while information processing happens if someone receives the information without deliberately searching for it (Grunig, 1979; Grunig & Hunt, 1984). The Situational Theory of the Public also consists of variables of situational perception. This variable has three dimensions: problem recognition, constraint recognition, and level of involvement. Problem recognition happens when someone perceives a situation as problematic. Constrain recognition happens when there is a constraint in a situation that limit his freedom to construct his behavior. Level of involvement is the extent to which the person connects himself with the objects in the situation (Grunig, 1979; Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

Other prominent studies also used this theory to measure public opinion, particularly by using quantitative approach. For instance, Sriramesh, Moghan, & Wei(2007) applied Situational Theory of the Public to investigate the communication behaviors of retail consumers in Singapore. They revealed that most consumers were an aware public but tended not to actively express the feelings because of cultural constraints. Lee & Rodriguez (2008) tested this theory to measure four types of public in relation to an anti-bioterrorism information campaign. They found that the four types have their own individual characteristics, such as media consumption habits, information sources, and behaviors. Aldoory, Kim, & Tindall(2010) conducted an experimental study to test the influence of perceived shared experience on this theory in terms of food terrorism in USA. This study revealed that the public tended to more actively search for information, recognize the problem, and be more involved when it had the same perception of the information.

3. Research Questions

Hence, this current research inquired about the public's response toward the problem of the mudflow, including their communication behaviors and the perceptions of the situations. Although this theory has often been overlooked, it has not been applied to explore the villagers' response to the crisis management during the mudflow crisis in Indonesia, particularly by using an ethnography method.

4. Research Method

As a qualitative research, ethnography method "allowed the researcher to ask questions of the respondents in more detail, with flexibility, and freely about all aspects regarding the mudflow crisis in natural setting"(Kriyantono, 2012, p. 216). The method allowed the researcher to use a variety of perspectives and theories to analyse data as well as a wide range of multiple sources of data, such as observations, interviews, focus group discussions, documents, diaries, news from the mass-media, emails, and articles (Bazeley, 2007; Hesse-Bibber & Leavy, 2006; Lichtman, 2006; Willis, 2007; Wimmer & Dominick, 2006; Yin, 1989). In addition to conducting direct observation, the research consisted of two focus group discussions (total 12 people) and individual interviews with 10 villagers (primary data) and with other members of the public such as academics, public relations and media practitioners (secondary data).

The villagers, as the subjects of this research, were chosen by using purposive and snow-ball sampling techniques. The number of respondents was subject to change and it depended on data availability during the fieldwork, because qualitative research is "thought to be fluid and ever-changing" (Lichtman, 2006, p. 9). The research also offers the methodological implication in the area of Public relations research. An ethnography method allows Public relations practitioners to write narratives in thick descriptions about the reality under study. Public relations will be able to give a chance for the public to express deeply all aspects of their feelings and their opinions in their natural settings.

5.　*Findings*

5.1.　Social-Cultural Backgrounds

Based on the social-cultural backgrounds, the research discovered two kinds of villages: '*Perumahan*' (residences) and '*Desa/Kampong*' (villages). The former refers to Perumtas, a new village that most of its residents came from other places. The latter refers to native people who lived in 11 other villages for generations. "*Perumahan*" symbolizes a modern residential estate with a higher social status while "*Desa or Kampong*" represents a traditional one. People who lived at Perumtas were called "*WargaPerumahan*" (the Residents); People who lived at 11 other Villages were called "*WargaDesa* or *Warga Kampong*" (the villagers/native-villagers). Generally, the term "kampong" refers to village area in rural community and it refers to, as Guinness called, "off-street neighborhoods" (Guinness, 1986, p. vii) in urban community. The situation appears to be linked to Newsberry's(2007, p. 130) idea that the term kampong in Indonesia has been used to refer to "port city ethnic enclaves, royal guild areas, and rural village settlements, but common usage now, kampong refers to urban neighborhoods with high population density and low economic status. Specifically in the urban area, kampung is perceived as the settlement of "wongcilik" (little people, poor people) who live at behind main streets along crowded alleyways or gang.

In this article, the author uses 'the villagers' to refer to the villagers (from all 11 villages and Perumtas); the term 'native-villagers' is used to refer to the villagers (except Perumtas); the term 'residents' is used to refer to only the villagers from Perumtas. The researcher noticed that sociologically, '*Perumtas'* represented an urban community, whereas the other villages represented rural communities. As an urban community, the residents from *Perumtas* were more heterogeneous (in culture and occupation) and individualistic. On the other hand, the rural communities were more homogeneous and exhibited close social bonds. Most of the villagers were born and had lived in their village for a long time as extended families. Therefore, they knew each other very well and had a sense of togetherness or community. The land and houses held not only economic value but also cultural value. They were evidence of their ancestors' existence and it was considered an honour to maintain the ancestors' belongings.

The villagers helped each other in daily activities: for example, if one villager wanted to build house, his neighbours and relatives would help voluntarily. They called this help "*gotongroyong*" (voluntary social working/mutual assistance/mutual cooperation). This concept was also exhibited when the villagers built public facilities and because they felt that they were a family, they tended to be non-profit oriented. This concept was also applied to property. They lived with the concept of "*milikbersama*" (a property is owned by all). For example, one village had its own cemetery and mosque. Therefore, according to Sullivan (1991, p. 1), "gotongroyong is a ideology that something essential to all societies which helps reproduce social order." Likewise, this togetherness is mirrored in Javanese philosophy: "*mangangakmangan sing pentingngumpul*" (it is important to be together although there is not enough food to eat). Based on this concept, it was acceptable that young married couples were still living with their parents.

The concept of togetherness also appeared with certain activities such as "*arisan*" (a regular social gathering whose members contribute a fixed amount to and take turns at winning an aggregate the entire collected sum of money), and some cultural religious activities, such as "*pengajian*" (reading and learning the Holy Qur'an together in a group), "*selametan*" (praying and thanking God for everything in order to gain safety), and "*jama'ahYasin*" (group of people reading a Yasin verse from the Holy Qur'an to pray for ancestors). These activities were usually conducted regularly every week or every month. In spite of the fact that the dichotomies were still happening, the researcher recognized that acculturation processes took place between the people from '*Perumtas*' and other villages.

They frequently interacted through economic activities (such as selling/purchasing activities at the village market), social activities (such as "*gotongroyong*", arisan, and social meetings at the Village Office), and religious activities (such as "*pengajian/tiba'an*" and "*Selametan*").

Most villagers interviewed in this study admitted that they had lost their cultural activities. For example, they described three specific occasions: a week before the full month of fasting (called "*Megengan*"); during the Ramadhan month of fasting; and two days of IdulFitri (the Holy Days, a day after the month of fasting). These three occasions were the best moments to celebrate with extended families and to offer forgiveness and visit the dead in the cemetery (*ziarah*). During Ramadhan, as with other Moslems, the villagers read Al Qur-an (the holy book) loudly with a microphone in mosques from dusk until dawn. There is more than one mosque and cemetery in every village because the villagers donated money to build mosques. During IdulFitri, the villagers, who had left the village to work in other places, usually came and visited their relatives. This phenomenon is called "*mudik*" (return to family home). They visited each other to offer forgiveness by shaking hand and saying quietly "*mohonmaaflahirbathin*" (I ask forgiveness body & soul) for any misunderstanding, carelessness, fouls, or insults that might have happened during the past year. It is interesting that other neighbors from other religion, such as Catholic, Protestant, and Budhist came to joined with the Moslems to offer forgiveness. It mirrored the tolerance for religious difference among the villagers.They also visited the cemetery in order to pray for their ancestors. This can help people remember their childhood, their dead, their mortality, and maintaining connectedness to the land, country, and the God.

However, not only houses but also mosques and cemeteries have been submerged by the mudflow. As a result, cultural traditional and religious activities have also been buried in it. The villagers, then, observed the holy days by praying at the embankment. They also spread flowers on the embankment which was believed to be the location of the cemetery.

5.2. Situational Perceptions

Most respondents perceived that the company's efforts to deal with the social problems were undertaken slowly. An appropriate action had been established three months after several villages were submerged. The villagers waited for 3-4 months after moving to the temporary shelter (at the new Porong Market) or staying at their relatives' houses before receiving money for two years of rental from Lapindo. They still lived in uncertainty as they had not obtained complete compensation for losing their homes and land. From the respondents' descriptions, it is apparent that the mudflow was a traumatic and horrible experience. In general at the beginning, the researcher recognized this experience as problematic situation: *Firstly*, the villagers lost the jobs as a source of income and future life.

Secondly, the villagers lost their land and houses, and their peaceful life. Before their villages were submerged, their lives became unpleasant because of the pollution, traffic jams, dust, and noise. They smelt an unpleasant odour every day after the eruption and the dust (the village road was dusty as the trucks carrying sand passed by to build embankments). The villagers were also forced to stay in the refugee shelter after the mud inundated their villages.

Thirdly, the villagers felt anxious about the mudflow every day. The situation was made worse as a result of a dearth of information about what had happened. They admitted that the information was passed from person to person instead of coming from the company and the government. Frequently, the villagers questioned whether the mud would inundate their residences or not, whether they should move or not and whether the smell would impact on their health. They also questioned whether they would obtain compensation if they evacuated their furniture.

Therefore, they decided to protect their villages in their own way such as putting sand bags in the villages' gates, building the wall in their yard to dam the mud, and conducting demonstrations to ask the compensation.

Furthermore, this uncertainty caused conflict among the villagers. For examples, the villagers from Kedungbendo forced Lapindo to build an embankment, whereas other villagers refused, reasoning that if the embankment was built the mud could submerge their village.

5.3. The Public Response

From the observations, there were types of the villagers' demands depends on their social-cultural backgrounds.

It is apparent that the concept of togetherness mentioned in the previous section influenced the native-villagers' demand for compensation. At the beginning, although they were staying in the temporary shelter, the native-villagers actually wanted Lapindo to stop the eruption so they could go back to their village. The villagers cleaned the mud up after it flowed to the village several times. After the mud inundated the village and could not be cleaned up, the villagers were happy for the relocation scheme. In terms of the relocation scheme, the native-villagers wanted to conduct "*bedholdeso*". It meant that the villagers from one village would be moved together to a one new location with the same social cultural settings. It was hoped that they could live with the same neighbours and relatives. However, several months after the eruption, most of them changed their mind. The native-villagers' demand changed to cash money in a lump sum rather than relocation. On the other hand, at the beginning, the residents demanded Lapindo to buy their house and land. They chose to get cash money in a lump sum (The government regulations, finally, decided that Lapindohad to pay in installment scheme: 20% and 80% of compensation).

In addition, the reasons that made the native-villagers agree to cash money demandwere: *firstly*, there was no immediate action. There was a clear lack of information about either the location or the procedure of the relocation scheme. At that time, the all villagers had no understanding of the place they would be relocated or resettled. After three months waiting in the temporary shelter, the relocation scheme tended to be a discourse only. They also worried that the type of the new house and the environment would not align with their wishes. However, the location became obvious when Bakrie Group built a new residential area in 2008 (when 80% compensation should be paid). The native-villagers agree if they were relocated to other place slight after the mud flowed. At that time, the native-villagers still had a wish to get together again with our old neighbors. Besides, the social status could be the most stressful factor while leaving out the village.

Secondly, they would receive a large amount money in the event that the compensation would be paid in a lump sum (at the beginning, they wanted to receive 100% of compensation). At that time, the price of compensation for the land and house was higher than market price. Furthermore, most of the native-villagers had large area of land and house. *Thirdly*, during renting a new house, the villagers were able to adapt to their new environment as well as to obtain a new experience. Some of them had a new house or bought the rented house after receiving 20% of compensation from the company.

There appears to be reasonable that the economical factor was the important motive when the compensation payments were conducted. After receiving money for 20% of compensation, the villagers were offered a relocation plus scheme for 80% of compensation. This scheme meant that the villagers would obtain a new house which was built by Bakrie Group and would receive the changes even if they were paid the rest of money. Some native-villagers agreed, but others did not agree with the option. They agreed because they needed money and a certainty and most of them did not have a legal certificate of land and house whereas in fact Lapindo required it to give compensation. The native-villagers perceived that it was better to obtain a new house rather than wait in an uncertain situation. In comparison with the villagers, the residents from Perumtas preferred to demand that Lapindo buy their land and house. This demand was stated by the Team 16 (the residents' representative), before Perumtas was sunk by the mudflow. However, Lapindo refused with the reason being that their residences had not been affected directly. Direct impact meant that the land and homes were submerged by the mudflow. From the company's point of view, the company would give compensation for the village that had been sank or submerged by the mud.

The respondents agreed that Lapindo insisted on relocation so the residents' commitment was finally divided into groups of interest. Finally, the research revealed that the relocation plus was contrary to the Government Regulation, the compensation had to be paid in cash in installments instead of the relocation. In the end of this section, regarding the variable of situational perceptions, the researcher grouped the description about the villagers' experience and demands in table 1.

4.4. Communication Behaviors

The research also revealed the communication behaviours of the villagers. Respondents said that in a short time after the first eruption, the villagers tended to seek information to scan the environment in order to recognize the problems instead of only waiting the information (the information processing). Quickly, this event became a topic of discussion among the villagers.

The villagers usually conducted "*gethoktular*" among the neighbors. "*Gethoktular*" is a personal communication that is usually conducted when the villagers meet and talk to each other (word of mouth communications). They usually gathered in front of one victim's house. It is called "*cangkruk*" (Two or more people sit down and talk about any topics as a leisure time activity). This personal communication helped the villagers to gain new information from the neighbors or explore the information that they had already obtained from the mass media. From this situation, the researcher noticed that the villagers were an aware public at the beginning of the crisis. As an aware public, they actually recognized the situation that potentially threatened their life. They were likely to have knowledge or information about the problem from communication activities.

4.3.1. Source of Information

Importantly, the villagers argued that they searched for information either from personal communication channels or the mass media. From further exploration, the researcher uncovered that the trusted personal communication sources were the village opinion leaders. The researcher found two types of opinion leaders: formal and informal. The former were the people who were involved in the government structures such as the head of the village and his staff. The villagers trusted and had a close relationship with the head of the village because this officer was from the same village and was elected directly by the villagers. This officer is the lowest rank in the government structure and the villagers called him "*Pak Lurah*". In addition, "*Pak Lurah*" and his staff were also villagers because their land and houses were submerged by the mudflow.

Meanwhile, the informal opinion leaders were the people who were not part of the government structures such as the head of the residents (RW) and the head of neighbors (RT). They existed because the villagers trusted them as the leaders and they worked voluntarily. In daily life, they have a role as the coordinator of the residents and as mediator between the residents with the village officers. During the crisis, the head of the residents and the head of the neighbors joined with groups of villagers to struggle their rights. Perumtas residents had Team 16, whereas other villages had The Movement of the Mud Victiims (GKLL). These groups acted as the villagers' representatives to gain compensation as well as provide information.

Regarding the most trusted source of information during the crisis, Respondent 3,for example, said that Prior announcement only came from the village officers. These were usually shouted through the microphone of mosque. They directly disseminated information by setting up villagers meeting quite often. After building an embankment, the information was delivered through the village chief. Some people were used to ask Public Relations officer from Lapindo. They made a report to RT; RT forwarded it to RW; RW passed it through the village officers and the village officers asked PR Officer. However, Lapindo would just stand still.

In addition, there appears to be an agreement that all participants in FGDs perceived that the trusted information came from RT, RW, Team 16, Village Officers, and GKLL. Hence, they relied on the instructions from these leaders. For example, Participant 1 said that he trusted Team 16. The leader informs RW; RW conveys to RT; RT shares with all residents. However, we also build communication with other community groups, such as GKLL and the villagers, and our best friends. In addition, Participant 3 told that he gained information from RT. RT gathered us to meet at his house and informed us the information from the Team 16. If we questioned but he did not answer it, usually he said to ask to RW or Team 16. Sometime, he wrote messages through the cellular phone.

4.3.2. A Model of Communication Flow

These opinions above provide clear descriptions and practical considerations that the information dissemination created a model of communication flow among the villagers. This model can be seen in figure 1. It is clear that this model of communication flow enhances the knowledge that the villagers obtained the information from the head of neighbors (RT) or the head of residents (RW) through face to face personal communication. These RTs and RWs, as they are the members of Team 16 or GKLL, followed up the villagers' inquiries and collected the information from the Team 16, GKLL or Village office to convey it to the villagers. Finally, Team 16, GKLL or Village Officers acted as the victim representation to lobby the government and Lapindo. There was a rule that the villagers should contact to these groups rather than directly contacted to Lapindo. For example, as stated by Respondent 1 that he would not give personal data about his residents without prior license from Team 16.

Figure 1 illustrated that before GKLL or the Team 16 was formed, the Village Office became the centre for information. After these groups were formed, the role of the Village Officers was reduced.

The Village Officers focused more on legal documents such as land ownership and mediated the conflicts among the villagers regarding these documents.

Finally, the role of the personal communication channel and the mass media to knowledge regarding the crisis is also drawn clearly in this model. Besides the information from personal communication, the villagers admitted that they obtained information from the mass media.

However, that model describes only the flow of communication instead of describing the initiator of the information. The villagers frequently urged Lapindo for information by conducting mass demonstrations. They searched for information to reduce the uncertainty of the situation. Due to a dearth of information before and after the eruption, the villagers frequently asked for information. Unfortunately, without conducting demonstration, they were not given information. From this statement, it is obvious that the villagers grew from the awareness to be an active public during the crisis.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that the villagers were living in hardship due to the mudflow crisis. This crisis resulted in various levels of vulnerability. The villagers experienced that this event made them suffer because they lost jobs, land and houses, and a social cultural life. Furthermore, they have to wait for compensation in an uncertain situation. On the other hand, despite the fact that they also waited for several months to receive compensation, some of the villagers had the low level of anxiety because they have either permanent jobs or other houses at other places. Regarding the variability of situational perceptions, this article portrays that the villagers recognized that the mudflow created a problematic situation, such as uncertain compensation and dearth of information. As a result, they were more involved in seeking information and conducting demonstrations.

The research outlines clearly that the villagers were an aware public because they tended to seek information actively in a short time after the first eruption. Instead of only waiting for information (the information processing), they tended to scan the environment in order to recognize the problems. Furthermore, they were also an active public since they conducted demonstrations to claim their rights. As a result of this information seeking process, this research revealed a model of communication flow among the villagers. This model enhances the knowledge that the villagers obtained the information particularly from personal communication and the mass media in order to obtain the knowledge regarding the crisis. However, most of them relied on their opinion leaders as the trusted source of information. It is apparent that Public Relations officers were not proactive in providing information. The failure to provide and control the flow of information accurately and efficiently made the crisis worse. The consequences of not responding the crisis promptly, was that the villagers, as members of the external public, have been living in hardship. Public Relations activity should apply the function of boundary-spanning to facilitate and to monitor the environment. It seems that Lapindo viewed the villagers as passive and only receiving organizational messages rather than being active and equal participants.

On the contrary, based on the Situational Theory of the Public, the observation of the villagers' behavior during the mudflow crisis found that the villagers actively sought explanation by frequently demonstrating against the company and the government to gain information. They felt that neither the company nor the government gave clear explanations about what happened. For example, social warnings, compensation, and what people should do was not relayed to the public. The villagers also admitted that there was a problematic situation (problem recognition); however, they did not obtain clear information and could not express their feelings because of the communication barriers (constraint recognition).

5. Acknowledgment

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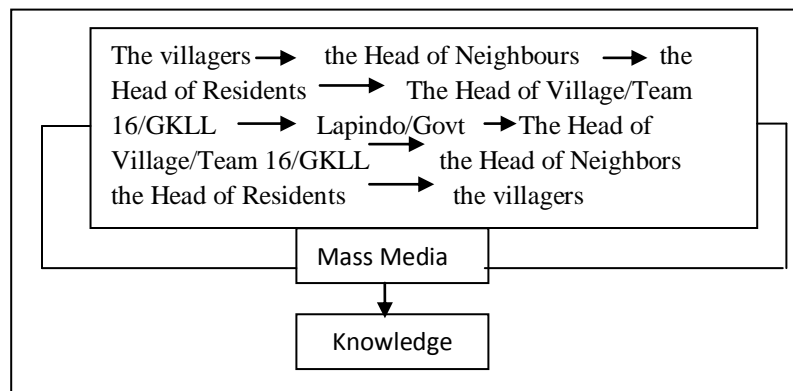Yin, R. K. (1989). *Case study research: Design and methods* (Revised ed.). California: Sage.

Figure 1. Model of Communication Behavior of the Public

Variable of Situational Perceptions		
Problem Recognition	**Constrain situation**	**Level of Involvement**
- Loosing of house, social and cultural life - Unpleasant life: water & air pollution, feeling stress. - Demand to Lapindo to pay compensation - Team 16 was consistent to demand cash & carry - GKLL change their demand: "bedoldeso" to cash & carry to relocation plus - Team 16 consistently demanded cash payment as stated in the presidential regulations.	- Uncertain situation because of lack of information - The compensation payments were a circuitous process. - Lapindo and the Government were perceived to set up the type of compensation although the new decision about compensation did not obey the previous decisions.	- The villagers were involved to collect information - The villagers were involved to conduct demonstrations.

Table 1. The villagers' experience and demands in table 1

Picture 1.Perumtas was sunk in November 26, 2006 (Left); Perumtas was submerged in February 9, 2007. (Photo: Rachmat)

Picture 2. People were in line to gain food at the temporary shelter. A mother with her son brought the food (Photo: Habibie).