

Documentary Film as Post-Disaster Communication: The Case of “Hope from the Floodwaters” in Agam Regency

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Abstract: *Post-disaster communication is often dominated by formal, technical, and one-way institutional messages, even though affected communities also need understandable information, recognition of their experiences, and spaces for rebuilding hope and participation. This study examines the role of the documentary film “Hope from the Floodwaters” as a medium for post-flood disaster communication and public outreach in Agam Regency, West Sumatra. A descriptive qualitative case-study design was employed. Data were obtained through content analysis of the documentary, field observations, and in-depth interviews with affected residents, volunteers, and local stakeholders. The data were analysed thematically through reduction, coding, theme development, interpretation, and source-and-technique triangulation. The findings identify five central communication functions: informative, educational, empathetic, participatory, and policy-bridging. The combination of post-flood imagery, residents’ testimonies, environmental sound, and recovery narratives translated technical information into a more contextual and accessible story. The film also positioned community members as subjects with voices, local knowledge, and the capacity to participate in recovery rather than as passive recipients of aid. Conceptually, the study frames documentary film not merely as an event archive but as post-disaster communication infrastructure linking information, lived experience, empathy, participation, and collective learning. The study did not statistically measure audience effects; future research should therefore test changes in knowledge, attitudes, and participation before and after documentary screenings.*

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INTRODUCTION

Indonesia’s exposure to hydrometeorological hazards makes communication an integral component of disaster management. Floods and flash floods damage infrastructure and livelihoods, but their consequences also extend to social relations, psychological security, educational continuity, and public confidence in recovery. Agam Regency in West Sumatra illustrates this multidimensional vulnerability. National disaster documentation records severe flood and flash-flood impacts in the region, underlining the need for communication that remains relevant after emergency response activities have subsided (National Disaster Management Agency [BNPB], 2025). In this phase, communities require clear information about assistance, public services, livelihood recovery, environmental risks, and preparedness for subsequent events.

Disaster communication is not limited to the rapid transmission of warnings. It also involves meaning-making, trust, dialogue, and the social coordination required before, during, and after a crisis. The crisis and emergency risk communication model emphasises that messages must be timely, credible, understandable, and responsive to public needs (Reynolds & Seeger, 2005). More recent disaster-risk communication scholarship distinguishes between one-way dissemination, two-way

dialogue, and participatory communication in which communities contribute to the production and interpretation of knowledge (Lejano et al., 2021; Stewart, 2024). Indonesian scholarship similarly shows that communication is a central element of disaster management, although research has often concentrated on preparedness, warnings, emergency information, or digital media use rather than the longer recovery phase (Oktavia & Wardah, 2025).

Post-disaster communication presents a specific problem. Institutional communication can become formal, technocratic, and detached from everyday experience. Information may be accurate yet still difficult to absorb when it is delivered without local context, familiar voices, or recognition of loss. Communication-related vulnerability arises when people cannot access, understand, trust, or act upon available information (Hansson et al., 2020). Affected residents may also experience communication fatigue when messages repeatedly describe damage but provide little explanation of recovery processes or opportunities for participation. Consequently, effective post-disaster communication must connect factual clarity with emotional sensitivity and social relevance.

Audiovisual media offer one way to build this connection. Documentary film combines images, spoken testimony, ambient sound, narration, temporal sequencing, and place-based detail. Unlike a short institutional announcement, a documentary can show how damage is experienced, how residents respond, and how recovery unfolds over time. Documentary practice is grounded in claims about the social world while remaining a constructed form whose meaning depends on selection, framing, editing, and narrative organisation (Aufderheide, 2013). This dual character makes documentary film relevant to disaster communication: it can preserve evidence while also organising that evidence into a story that audiences can follow.

The contribution of narrative is especially important in contexts marked by loss and uncertainty. Disaster storytelling serves educational and recovery functions because stories transmit practical knowledge, preserve experience, and create reciprocal relationships between narrators and listeners (Nagamatsu et al., 2021). Narrative approaches can also support emotional recovery by enabling survivors to articulate experience and reconstruct continuity after disruption (Kargillis et al., 2014). Post-disaster mental-health scholarship further indicates that trauma, anxiety, and stress may continue after physical reconstruction, making psychosocial support relevant to recovery communication (Esterwood & Saeed, 2020). Research on narrative transportation suggests that engagement with a story can support empathic responding, although the strength and direction of this relationship depend on audience and message conditions (Walkington et al., 2020). Thus, empathy should not be treated as an automatic effect of moving images; it is a communicative possibility created through ethical representation and meaningful narrative structure.

Visual communication can also strengthen participation. Participatory visual methods allow communities to express local perceptions of risk, identify barriers to preparedness, and make visible forms of capacity that may be overlooked by external institutions (Bray et al., 2023). Flood-risk communication studies also show that participation can improve awareness and preparedness when local actors are meaningfully involved rather than treated only as information recipients (Fekete et al., 2021; Šakić Trogrlić et al., 2021). In Indonesian disaster management, participatory communication has been associated with dialogue, consensus, collaboration, and the recognition of local actors as partners rather than message targets (Bakti et al., 2023). When residents' testimonies are integrated into a documentary, the film can become a site where official information and community knowledge encounter one another.

Documentary film may additionally operate in the policy sphere. Whiteman (2009) demonstrates that documentary films can influence activists, agendas, and policy discussion by circulating evidence and framing public problems. In disaster contexts, this function is not limited to direct policy change. A documentary may bridge the language of programmes and services with the social realities those programmes are intended to address. It may also contribute to collective memory. Place-based memory work helps communities interpret disasters, negotiate identity, and build resilience over time (Farny & Dentoni, 2025). Arts and cultural activities more broadly can support disaster-risk reduction and recovery by enabling expression, social connection, learning, and community participation (Hooker et al., 2026).

Despite these insights, three gaps remain. First, much disaster communication research prioritises emergency response, warnings, or social media functionality (Houston et al., 2015), leaving post-disaster public outreach less developed as a distinct communication problem. Second, documentary scholarship frequently discusses representation, advocacy, or policy influence, but fewer studies examine documentary film as an integrated medium for recovery information, psychosocial recognition, participation, and preparedness. Third, studies in Indonesia rarely connect documentary form, local testimony, and policy outreach within a single analytical framework for post-flood recovery.

This study addresses those gaps through a case study of “Hope from the Floodwaters”, a documentary developed in relation to post-flood conditions in Agam Regency. The study asks: How does the documentary function as a medium for post-disaster communication and public outreach, and how do its visual narrative, disaster messages, and representation of community experience support understanding, empathy, participation, and collective preparedness? The study’s novelty lies in conceptualising documentary film as post-disaster communication infrastructure. Rather than treating the film only as a record or cultural product, the analysis examines how it connects five communication functions: information, education, empathy, participation, and policy bridging.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study used a descriptive qualitative approach and a case-study method. A case study was appropriate because the research focused on a bounded audiovisual product—“Hope from the Floodwaters”—and on the social context in which the film was produced and intended to be used. Qualitative inquiry enables researchers to examine meaning, experience, representation, and context rather than isolating variables from the setting in which they operate (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The research was carried out over a six-month period that included conceptual development, field data collection, documentary production, analysis, and preparation of research outputs.

The principal object of analysis was the documentary film. The film was treated as a multimodal communication text consisting of narrative structure, visual composition, spoken testimony, narration, environmental sound, representations of actors, and messages about recovery and preparedness. The research context comprised post-flood communities in Agam Regency. The interview corpus included accounts from affected residents, volunteers, and local stakeholders, while observation focused on post-flood social conditions, information needs, recovery activities, and the local communication environment.

Selected frame captures are reproduced in Figures 1–3 as visual evidence of the multimodal material examined during the analysis. The frames were selected because they represent the

infrastructural, institutional, community, and psychosocial dimensions identified through thematic coding.

Table 1. Data Sources and Analytical Focus

Data source	Analytical focus
Documentary film	Narrative structure; images; sound; testimony; representation of actors; recovery, mitigation, and preparedness messages.
Field observation	Post-flood social context; information needs; recovery practices; local communication conditions.
Interviews and testimonies	Lived experience; perceived relevance and clarity of messages; trust; local knowledge; participation.
Cross-source interpretation	Convergence and divergence among film content, field conditions, community accounts, and institutional messages.

Data were collected through three complementary techniques. First, documentary content analysis was used to identify how the film organised events, represented damage and recovery, positioned community members, and presented informational, educational, and policy-related messages. Second, field observation was used to understand the social context behind the images and narratives, including community needs and the practical conditions of recovery. Third, in-depth interviews and recorded testimonies were used to examine how affected residents and relevant actors described their experiences and evaluated the relevance and comprehensibility of the messages represented in the film. The study did not employ a statistical sampling frame because it was designed for contextual qualitative interpretation rather than population generalisation.

The analysis followed a thematic process. The researchers first reduced and organised field notes, interview materials, visual records, and documentary sequences. Initial codes were then assigned to recurring meanings, including the visibility of post-flood conditions, access to recovery information, mitigation lessons, community testimony, emotional recognition, local participation, institutional messages, and collective memory. Related codes were grouped and refined into five overarching communication functions: informative, educational, empathetic, participatory, and policy-bridging. The procedure was consistent with thematic analysis as a method for developing patterned meanings across qualitative materials (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Interpretation moved iteratively between the documentary text, field context, interview material, and relevant literature. Trustworthiness was supported through source and technique triangulation: observations were compared with interviews, visual documentation, documentary content, and scholarly concepts. The coding process also required themes to be supported by more than one type of material before they were retained. Such documentation and cross-checking strengthen the credibility and dependability of thematic analysis (Nowell et al., 2017). The study did not use an experimental or pre-test/post-test design; therefore, its claims concern communication functions, meaning, and qualitative reception rather than statistically demonstrated changes in audience knowledge or behaviour.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis shows that the documentary's value does not lie in a single message or stylistic device. Its communication capacity emerges from the relationship among visual evidence, residents' voices, narrative organisation, recovery information, and the representation of collective action. Five

interrelated functions were identified. They should be understood as analytical functions rather than separate stages or statistically tested effects.

Documentary film as a translation layer for recovery information

The informative function was visible in the film's presentation of post-flood landscapes, damaged surroundings, disrupted activities, and ongoing recovery. These images gave material form to conditions that might otherwise be communicated through abstract terms such as "impact," "rehabilitation," or "reconstruction." Visual evidence enabled audiences to see the scale and texture of the problem, while narration and testimony explained why particular needs remained important after the water receded.

This function can be described as translation rather than mere transmission. Institutional information often begins in technical categories—assistance distribution, public services, infrastructure repair, mitigation, or preparedness. The documentary connected those categories to homes, neighbourhoods, livelihoods, and individual routines. By anchoring information in visible places and lived experience, the film reduced the distance between policy language and community reality. McQuail and Deuze (2020) note that media meaning is shaped by form, context, and audience interpretation; the film's combination of modes made recovery information more concrete without eliminating its complexity.

The field observations and interviews further indicated that residents needed communication that was clear, consistent, and easy to understand. A purely formal message may reach a population without becoming meaningful to it. This finding aligns with communication-related vulnerability research, which shows that access alone is insufficient when people cannot interpret or use information (Hansson et al., 2020). In the documentary, the informational function was strengthened when images, testimony, and narration confirmed one another. The result was not a replacement for official communication, but a complementary layer that contextualised it.

The analysis also revealed an ethical advantage. By showing recovery rather than focusing exclusively on destruction, the film avoided reducing Agam to a spectacle of damage. The narrative acknowledged loss while also documenting action, adaptation, and hope. This balance is important because disaster images can attract attention yet still reproduce helplessness when communities are represented only as victims. The documentary's informative function was strongest when evidence of damage was connected to explanations of need, response, and community capacity.

Figure 1 shows how an aerial establishing shot converts the scale of post-disaster recovery into visible evidence. Damaged riverbanks, heavy equipment, and the partial restoration of mobility are presented within one spatial frame, allowing audiences to connect institutional recovery language with observable conditions.



Figure 1. Post-disaster infrastructure recovery around Kembar Sialang Bridge, West Sumatra.

Source: Frame capture from “Hope from the Floodwaters” (research documentation, 2026).

Educational communication and contextual disaster literacy

The educational function appeared through messages about mitigation, environmental awareness, preparedness, and lessons derived from the flood experience. These messages were embedded in a story rather than delivered as a detached instructional list. This allowed disaster knowledge to be linked with recognisable places, decisions, and consequences. The film therefore supported contextual disaster literacy: an understanding of risk that is grounded in local experience and expressed through forms that non-specialist audiences can follow.

Disaster storytelling is especially relevant to learning because it carries both practical and social knowledge. Nagamatsu et al. (2021) identify disaster education and recovery as major functions of storytelling, while emphasising reciprocal relationships between those who tell and receive stories. In the Agam case, testimony did more than illustrate a predetermined lesson. Residents’ experiences helped define what needed to be learned: the significance of preparedness, the persistence of recovery needs, the value of mutual assistance, and the importance of not treating a disaster as finished once media attention declines.

The film’s educational value also came from repetition across modes. A mitigation message expressed in narration could be reinforced by a visual example or a community account. This multimodal reinforcement is useful in contexts where audiences have different levels of literacy, media access, and familiarity with technical terminology. It also aligns with flood preparedness scholarship that emphasises participation, shared understanding, and readiness as important components of risk communication (Fekete et al., 2021). The documentary can be screened in community forums, schools, campuses, government channels, and digital platforms, allowing the same core material to be discussed in different settings.

However, educational potential should not be confused with measured learning outcomes. The present study did not compare knowledge before and after viewing. Its evidence shows that the documentary contains and contextualises educational messages and that participants regarded experience-based communication as easier to relate to. Future evaluation is needed to determine

which sequences are most effective for particular audience groups and whether viewing produces sustained changes in preparedness.

Empathy and the humanisation of post-disaster experience

The empathetic function emerged from the film's decision to place residents' experiences at the centre of the narrative. Testimonies connected physical damage to interrupted livelihoods, uncertainty, family responsibilities, and the effort required to begin again. This changed the communicative object from "a flood" as an event to recovery as an ongoing human process. Viewers were invited to encounter individual voices and emotions rather than only statistics or institutional summaries.

Narrative research helps explain why this representation matters. Stories can create conditions for perspective-taking and empathic response when audiences become engaged with characters and situations (Walkington et al., 2020). In disaster recovery, narrative expression may also help survivors organise experience and restore a sense of continuity (Kargillis et al., 2014). The documentary thus operated in two directions: outward, by making community experience intelligible to broader audiences, and inward, by recognising that affected people possess memories and interpretations worthy of public attention.

Empathy in this context was not simply an emotional appeal. It supported comprehension by explaining why recovery information mattered. For example, a message about services or economic recovery becomes more meaningful when audiences understand the daily consequences of disruption. Emotional proximity can therefore strengthen the relevance of factual information. At the same time, the film's narrative of hope prevented empathy from becoming pity. Residents were shown as people who experienced loss but also acted, collaborated, and contributed knowledge.

This finding has an ethical implication for disaster media. Humanising representation requires consent, context, dignity, and restraint. The strongest sequences were those in which testimony was connected to the speaker's social environment and to the broader recovery process. Such contextualisation reduces the risk of extracting emotional statements merely to intensify a story. Documentary communication is most constructive when it recognises vulnerability without fixing communities in a permanent identity of helplessness.

Participation and the recognition of local voice

The participatory function was visible in the representation of residents, volunteers, and local stakeholders as actors in recovery. The film did not present the community solely as an audience for institutional instructions. Community members appeared as sources of knowledge, witnesses, organisers, and participants. Their presence helped establish the authenticity of the narrative and broadened the range of perspectives through which post-flood conditions were interpreted.

This finding corresponds with participatory disaster communication, which emphasises dialogue, collaboration, democratic involvement, and consensus-building (Bakti et al., 2023). It also resembles the logic of participatory visual methods, where images and stories make local risk perceptions and capacities visible to decision-makers and other audiences (Bray et al., 2023). The emphasis on local knowledge is important because disaster-risk reduction is stronger when external stakeholders engage seriously with community knowledge rather than treating it as symbolic participation (Šakić Trogrlić et al., 2021). Although the documentary was a produced media text rather than a fully community-

controlled photovoice project, its incorporation of local testimony created openings for community knowledge to shape the public account of recovery.

Participation operated at three levels. At the representational level, local actors were visible and audible. At the interpretive level, their accounts influenced how problems and priorities were framed. At the dissemination level, the film could support discussion in community forums, educational institutions, government settings, and online spaces. These levels are analytically distinct: being shown in a film does not automatically mean having control over its production or use. Nevertheless, the inclusion of local voices is an important move away from a strictly top-down model. Communication research on community-based disaster response similarly shows that locally embedded systems and social organisation can become vital resources for collective action (Ponce de Leon, 2021).

The participatory function also strengthened trust. Interview and testimonial materials suggested that messages were easier to accept when they came not only from formal institutions but also from people with direct field experience. Peer and local voices can function as credibility resources, particularly when institutional messages are perceived as distant. This does not diminish the responsibility of government and disaster-management agencies; rather, it shows the value of combining institutional authority with situated community knowledge (Lejano et al., 2021; Šakić Trogrlić et al., 2021).

As illustrated in Figure 2, the documentary constructs a dialogic narrative by placing institutional explanation and lived community experience within the same communicative field. This juxtaposition supports policy bridging while preventing the official account from displacing the voice of affected residents.



Figure 2. Institutional and community perspectives represented through interviews: (a) a local police stakeholder and (b) an affected resident.

Source: Frame captures from “Hope from the Floodwaters” (research documentation, 2026).

Policy bridging, collective memory, and resilient recovery

The fifth function was policy bridging. The documentary connected recovery programmes and public information with the social conditions experienced by residents. This bridge operated in both directions. It translated institutional issues into concrete stories for communities and wider audiences, while also making community needs and experiences visible to institutions. In this sense, the film provided a communication interface between policy discourse and lived reality.

Documentary film can contribute to policy processes by shaping agendas, supplying evidence, and supporting networks of discussion (Whiteman, 2009). The Agam documentary’s policy relevance

was more modest and immediate: it made recovery needs comprehensible, showed the human implications of institutional action or delay, and offered material for public outreach. The study did not trace a specific policy decision caused by the film. Accordingly, policy bridging should be interpreted as a communicative capacity, not as proof of direct policy impact.

This function was closely related to collective memory. The documentary preserved images, voices, and interpretations that could otherwise disappear as public attention moved elsewhere. Collective memory is important because disaster learning depends on retaining more than a chronological record. Communities need narratives that explain what happened, what was lost, what forms of solidarity emerged, and what should be done differently. Place-based memory work can reinforce identity and resilience when it enables communities to connect past disruption with future action (Farny & Dentoni, 2025).

The film's recurring emphasis on hope and mutual assistance therefore had strategic value. It offered a recovery narrative without denying hardship. Arts and cultural practices can support disaster recovery by enabling expression, connection, learning, and participation (Hooker et al., 2026). In the present case, documentary form allowed these functions to coexist with informational and policy content. The result was a communication product that could archive experience, facilitate dialogue, and maintain preparedness as a public concern.

Figure 3 extends the meaning of recovery beyond roads, housing, and public services. The trauma-healing activity represents psychosocial recovery as an organised, relational process in which children are supported through interaction, play, and guided engagement. This scene reinforces the documentary's educational and empathetic functions and is consistent with evidence that post-disaster support must address emotional recovery as well as material reconstruction (Esterwood & Saeed, 2020; Kargillis et al., 2014).



Figure 3. A trauma-healing activity with children as a visual representation of psychosocial recovery.
Source: Frame capture from “Hope from the Floodwaters” (research documentation, 2026).

Table 2. Communication Functions of the Documentary

Function	Main finding	Communication implication
Informative	Post-flood conditions and recovery needs are made visible through images, narration, and testimony.	Technical information becomes more concrete and contextual.
Educational	Mitigation, preparedness, environmental awareness, and recovery lessons are embedded in local stories.	The film can support contextual disaster literacy.
Empathetic	Residents' experiences connect physical damage with social, economic, and emotional consequences.	Disaster communication becomes more human without reducing residents to victims.
Participatory	Residents, volunteers, and local stakeholders are represented as sources of knowledge and action.	Local voice can strengthen relevance, dialogue, and trust.
Policy-bridging	The film links institutional recovery messages with lived community realities and preserves collective memory.	The documentary can support outreach, discussion, and long-term preparedness.

Synthesis: Documentary film as post-disaster communication infrastructure

Taken together, the findings suggest a five-function continuum of post-disaster documentary communication. Visual evidence first makes conditions visible; narrative explanation supports comprehension; testimony creates emotional and ethical recognition; the inclusion of local actors opens participatory space; and the assembled story connects community experience with institutional discussion and collective memory. The continuum is not strictly linear. A single sequence may perform several functions simultaneously, and audiences may interpret it differently.

This synthesis extends functional approaches to disaster media. Houston et al. (2015) identify multiple functions of social media across disaster phases, including information provision, mobilisation, and community connection. The present study shows that documentary film offers a different temporal and narrative affordance. It is less immediate than social media but can provide continuity, depth, curation, and memory. These qualities are particularly relevant after the emergency phase, when the communication challenge shifts from rapid alerting to sustained understanding and recovery engagement.

The concept of documentary film as communication infrastructure does not imply a physical or technological system. It refers to an organised communicative resource that can connect actors, messages, experiences, and settings over time. The film becomes useful when embedded in a broader strategy involving facilitated screenings, community discussion, educational use, government channels, social media circulation, and follow-up information. This approach is consistent with co-produced risk communication, which highlights local knowledge, social learning, and narrative ways of knowing as foundations for improving disaster-risk communication (Lejano et al., 2021). Without such integration, even a strong documentary may remain a passive archive. With integration, it can complement formal outreach and help maintain dialogue during recovery.

Practical implementation should therefore follow several principles. Production should involve affected communities and local actors from the early stages; factual and policy messages should be verified; visual representation should protect dignity; and distribution should be accompanied by opportunities for questions and discussion. Different versions or supporting materials may be needed

for schools, community groups, government forums, and digital audiences. Finally, evaluation should examine not only reach or views but also comprehension, perceived relevance, trust, preparedness intentions, and opportunities for participation.

CONCLUSION

“Hope from the Floodwaters” demonstrates that documentary film can function as a strategic medium for post-disaster communication in Agam Regency. Its significance extends beyond documenting flood impacts. Through the combination of visual evidence, narration, environmental sound, residents’ testimonies, and recovery stories, the film performs five interrelated functions: informative, educational, empathetic, participatory, and policy-bridging. These functions help contextualise technical information, humanise recovery, recognise local knowledge, and preserve collective memory. The study contributes a conceptual view of documentary film as post-disaster communication infrastructure. This infrastructure links official information with lived experience and can support sustained public outreach after emergency attention has declined. Its effectiveness depends on ethical representation, community involvement, message verification, and integration with discussion and follow-up communication. Documentary film should therefore complement, rather than replace, formal disaster communication and direct public services. The findings are qualitative and case-specific. The research did not record population-level audience effects or use pre-test/post-test measurements. Future studies should document participant profiles and screening contexts in greater detail, compare audience responses across groups, and test whether documentary screenings produce changes in knowledge, attitudes, preparedness, trust, or participation. Comparative research in other disaster-prone regions would also help assess the transferability of the five-function framework.

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