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Social Innovation Through Communication: A Conceptual Framework for Connecting People, Ideas, and Impact

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ABSTRACT

Social innovation has emerged to the forefront as a means of addressing some of society's most intricate and persistent issues through cooperative, inclusive, and multi-stakeholder approaches. This paper proposes a conceptual framework that positions communication as the central mechanism for connecting people, ideas, and impact within social innovation ecosystems, particularly in diverse sociocultural settings. Grounded in practical experience from a university-led grassroots project, the Towards Uplifting Lives Programme (TULIP), in rural Sarawak, Malaysia, this study illustrates how communication enables stakeholder engagement, co-creation, empowerment, and sustainability. In particular, it demonstrates that effective communication strategies are essential for translating institutional intentions into grassroots-level change. Besides, this highlights the evolving role of universities in social innovation and introduces an adapted helix model that integrates community and environmental stakeholders alongside academia, industry, and government. The framework reflects the need for participatory engagement and the critical role of inclusive dialogue in shaping equitable outcomes. Recommendations on strategies focused on the inverse relationship between communications theory frameworks with social innovation paradigms are also discussed, offering insights for practitioners and academics alike. By reframing communication as a core enabler rather than a peripheral function, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of how meaningful relationships, shared narratives, and mutual trust are essential for achieving lasting social impact.

Keywords: *Social innovation, strategic communication, community engagement, quadruple helix model, grassroots development.*

INTRODUCTION

Social innovation is increasingly recognised as a vital mechanism to address entrenched societal issues such as poverty, inequality, unequal access to education, and even climate change (Jareh, 2025; Vercher et al., 2023). Unlike social business and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), which are only conceptually adjacent, social innovation offers a broader lens—one that focuses on sustainability and inclusive collaboration. Thus, one of the key issues often raised in discussions about social innovation is the vital role of communication in ensuring that such actions reach a broader audience with optimal impact (Hidayatullah & Kamali, 2024; Lee et al., 2021).

Communication is not just a bridging function between people, ideas, and outcomes—it is the element that makes social innovation actionable in practice (Cornelissen et al., 2021). Without effective communication, innovation efforts can remain fragmented,

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misunderstood, or disconnected from the communities they aim to serve (Dominici, 2018; Eseonu, 2022; Sidawi, 2012). It is thus pivotal in translating promising ideas into successful outcomes.

Aside from the crucial role of communication, it is also important to consider the target audience. Understanding a target audience is considered extremely important as it determines which mechanisms should be used to empower the target audience (Avelino et al., 2022; Meyer & Hartmann, 2025). This is because knowing the target audience allows social innovation to have an optimal impact based on the current needs of the community in a region (Afandi et al., 2024; Islam et al., 2021; Marchesi & Tweed, 2021). A one-size-fits-all approach often leads to irrelevant or unsustainable outcomes. Hence, culturally grounded, community-sensitive communication must guide both the design and deployment of social innovation initiatives.

While communication is often treated as an auxiliary function, such as for promotion or public relations (Krishnan & Ahmad, 2022; Zerfass et al., 2020), this paper posits that it is far more: it is the strategic enabler and catalyst of successful innovation. It enables sense-making, trust-building, ideation, co-creation, and adaptation (Cornelissen et al., 2015). These elements are crucial to achieving a lasting impact. Particularly in innovation ecosystems involving multiple stakeholders, communication facilitates the necessary coordination between academia, government, industry, civil society, and the environment. Stakeholders rely on context-rich human communication, not just digital tools, for alignment and decision-making (Misra & Wilson, 2023). In creative innovation settings, the absence of social interaction and communication has been shown to impede idea refinement and collaborative progress (Loureiro et al., 2020). Therefore, a key challenge remains: the lack of a conceptual framework that positions communication as a central, strategic infrastructure within the social innovation process. These interconnections are well captured in the Triple, Quadruple, and Quintuple Helix models, which are later explored in this paper.

Despite its theoretical recognition, communication remains underexplored in much of the social innovation literature. There is a need to reframe it not just as a function but as a core system of innovation. It is a relational, iterative, and participatory process that sustains collaboration, aligns expectations, and activates transformation. To address this gap, the present study proposes a communication-centred conceptual framework to demonstrate how strategic communication fosters stakeholder engagement, co-creation, and lasting social impact.

However, a key challenge remains: communication is often underexplored and treated as a peripheral element in social innovation initiatives, indicating a lack of frameworks that position communication at the core of the innovation process.

Drawing on practical experience at Universiti Teknologi PETRONAS (UTP), particularly through the grassroots-based Towards Uplifting Lives Programme (TULIP), this paper proposes a conceptual framework that places communication at the core of social innovation. The goal is to demonstrate how effective communication, when strategically positioned within an organisation's framework and processes, nurtures co-creation, sustainable trust and impact. In the Malaysian context, there has been limited attention given to communication as a strategic foundation in social innovation frameworks, particularly within rural or indigenous communities. Most interventions tend to emphasise resource delivery or technical solutions, rather than relational and process-driven change. By analysing the TULIP initiative, this paper contributes to an evolving discourse that centres communication not just as an enabler, but as a transformative force in academic-led grassroots innovation. By

examining the relational architecture of social innovation—how people, ideas, and institutions are interconnected—a conceptual lens is provided through which communication becomes the heartbeat of sustainable development, especially in contexts that require inclusive, long-term community engagement.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews key literature on social innovation and the role of communication. Section 3 introduces the theoretical basis for the framework. Section 4 presents the TULIP initiative as a practice-based foundation. Section 5 discusses the Communication-Centred Framework and its five phases. Finally, Sections 6 and 7 highlight the study's implications, limitations, and suggestions for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW OR RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Defining and Conceptualising Social Innovation

Social innovation refers to the development of new solutions and impactful innovation approaches that address persistent societal challenges while enhancing human well-being and promoting long-term sustainability (CoSI, 2024). It includes a wide spectrum of activities—ranging from new products and services to strategies, governance models, and social practices—that seek to transform systems and empower communities (Galego et al., 2022; Westley, 2008).

The term "social innovation" is often used interchangeably with or alongside related terms, such as social entrepreneurship and social business (Mair & Rathert, 2025). While these concepts have overlapping goals of tackling social issues and enhancing community resilience, differences in focus and scope exist. Social entrepreneurship is centred on corporate-led initiatives that focus on scaling and innovation (Sengupta & Sahay, 2017), whereas social business focuses mainly on achieving financial sustainability to achieve social impact objectives (Irene et al., 2016). Social innovation, on the other hand, serves as a broader conceptual umbrella that:

- Focuses on addressing societal problems through systemic transformation;
- May involve economic models with interest in profitability and reinvestment;
- Engages with calculated risks in uncertain or complex environments.

More importantly, social innovation is not limited to the realm of nonprofit or philanthropic activities. It encompasses a wide range of actors, including universities, businesses, governments, grassroots organisations, hybrid partnerships, and more recently, community-based movements (Gupta et al., 2015; Scuotto et al., 2023). It flourishes in cross-sectoral spaces where market, public interest, and local knowledge intersect (Pache et al., 2022).

Unlike traditional innovations that are linked to the advancement of technology or growth of the economy (Challoumis, 2024; Steil et al., 2002), social innovation focuses on the creation of social value (Foroudi et al., 2021). Their aim is to empower marginalised groups, promote inclusivity, improve access to services, strengthen equity, and foster resilience (Otten et al., 2022). Social Innovation is typically context-sensitive, iterative, and driven from the ground up (Osuna et al., 2024). Rather than inventing new tools or services, the aim is to transform how relationships, norms, and institutional logics operate, enabling systems to function more effectively for everyone.

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Social innovations leverage intangible assets, including information, trust systems, and culture (Amran et al., 2021; Headley & Byers, 2025). It is particularly powerful in contexts where state policy and market mechanisms fail to address local needs, providing an alternative pathway that is participatory, adaptive, and community-led.

As shown in Figure 1, a recent bibliometric mapping of social innovation research highlights the emergence of diverse thematic clusters, including sustainability, governance, entrepreneurship, social impact, education, and digital inclusion. This bibliometric mapping was derived from a Scopus-indexed literature search, ensuring broad coverage of relevant social innovation research. The growing body of literature reflects the multidisciplinary and evolving nature of social innovation, underscoring its relevance across policy, academia, and practice (Foroudi et al., 2021).

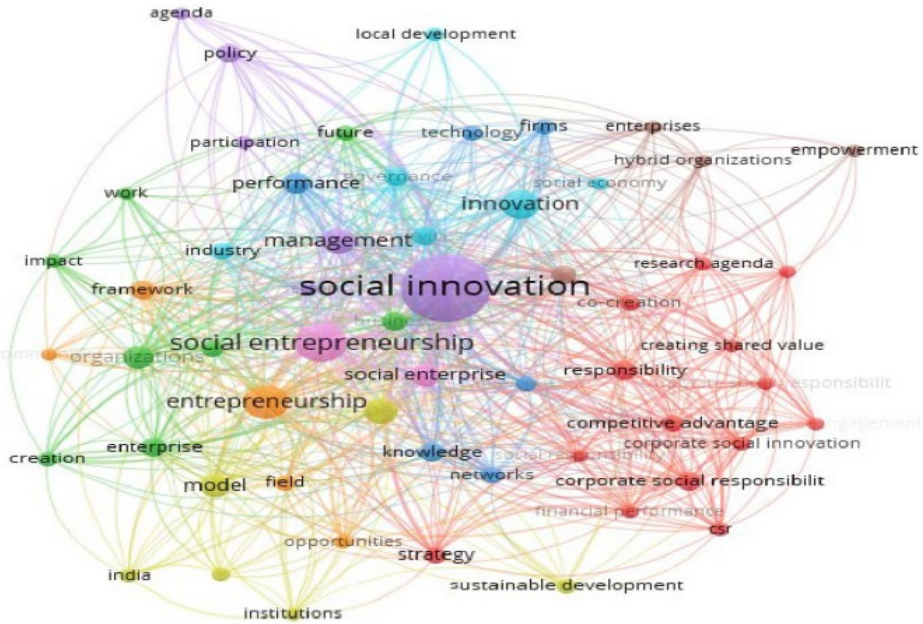


Figure 1: Network visualisation of bibliometric analysis of social innovation research themes
Source: Foroudi et al. (2021)

At the heart of effective social innovation is community empowerment. True innovation is not something done for communities—it is created with them. This participatory ethos engages communities not merely as users or beneficiaries, but as co-designers and agents of change. Solutions developed with local perspectives tend to be more culturally resonant, relevant, and durable. In this context, communication plays a foundational and integrative role. It enables stakeholders to:

- Understand social problems through contextual listening and dialogue;
- Share diverse knowledge types (scientific, indigenous, experiential);
- Build consensus, trust, and legitimacy across institutional divides;
- Co-create solutions that reflect local needs and global standards;
- Monitor and adapt strategies through continuous feedback and reflection.

Without robust, two-way communication which are grounded in empathy, equity, and openness, social innovation risks becoming extractive, misaligned, or unsustainable. Communication serves as a social infrastructure, facilitating connections across differences, navigating power dynamics, and reinforcing shared purpose and learning.

As Avelino et al., 2022 observe, social innovation is as much about transforming relationships, norms, and meanings as it is about introducing new tools or services. In this sense, communication is not only a medium but also a driver of transformation, illuminating the shifts in how people relate to themselves, to others, and to society.

In summary, social innovation is both an outcome and a process. It is a rethinking of what solutions look like—and more critically, how those solutions are generated and shared. Central to this rethinking is communication: the ability to engage across boundaries, build shared meaning, and move from fragmented efforts to co-created, sustained impact.

Conceptualising Social Innovation in the Malaysian Context

Social innovation refers to the creation and implementation of novel solutions to social challenges, designed to bolster overall community well-being (Horgan & Dimitrijević, 2018; Van Niekerk et al., 2023). In Malaysia, the idea cannot be directly lifted from the literature; it must be adapted to the socio-economic diversity of urban, rural, and indigenous communities (Bala et al., 2022; Nasir & Subari, 2017). Unlike traditional models of aid or philanthropy, social innovation as conceptualised in this study emphasises community empowerment and systemic transformation through participatory means.

Social innovation operates not as a linear process but as two interrelated spectrums. The first is The Fundamentals, which refers to knowledge generation. It is a stage focused on defining, conceptualising, and producing empirical research. This spectrum often supports academic-oriented goals such as theory building, bibliometric analysis, and interdisciplinary exploration. Without this foundational strand, social innovation lacks intellectual coherence and credible discourse (Satalkina & Steiner, 2022). It is crucial for building foundational understanding and developing a robust intellectual discourse around social issues.

The second spectrum is referred to as "Thick SI", or Three-Dimensional Social Innovation, which shifts the focus from theoretical understanding to applied, collaborative problem-solving. It seeks to achieve shared societal goals and long-term sustainability by optimising the value of resources and outcomes across diverse stakeholders (Secco et al., 2017). This thicker spectrum comprises three dynamic components:

- Knowledge Transfer – involves student-led initiatives, community engagement, innovation diffusion programs, and peer-to-peer learning. Knowledge flows bi-directionally, combining academic expertise with lived community wisdom (Rashid et al., 2024).
- Action-Oriented Implementation – concerns the actual testing of solutions in practice. This involves hands-on community work, design co-creation workshops, and applied fieldwork, such as the SIMRA model. Communication in this context is imperative toward achieving devotion to the practice and sustainability (Marini Govigli et al., 2020).
- Impact Assessment – looks into what works, what is refined, and what evolves in terms of strategies. This includes needs assessments, stakeholder reflection sessions, and incorporating local input into iterative adaptation processes (Pira et al., 2024).

Collectively, these two areas form a comprehensive framework for social innovation in Malaysia, spanning from intellectual groundwork to real-world transformation. Communication serves as the connective infrastructure. It facilitates relational knowledge in

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the discovery phase, enables coordination in the co-creation stage, and fosters learning during reflection.

As demonstrated in Figure 2, adopting a communication-centred approach to these spectrums ensures inclusion and innovation that is grounded, scalable and sustainable. Bridging stakeholders from different sectors, knowledge systems, and cultural divides is critical in nurturing a responsive social innovation ecosystem to Malaysia's complex myriad problems.

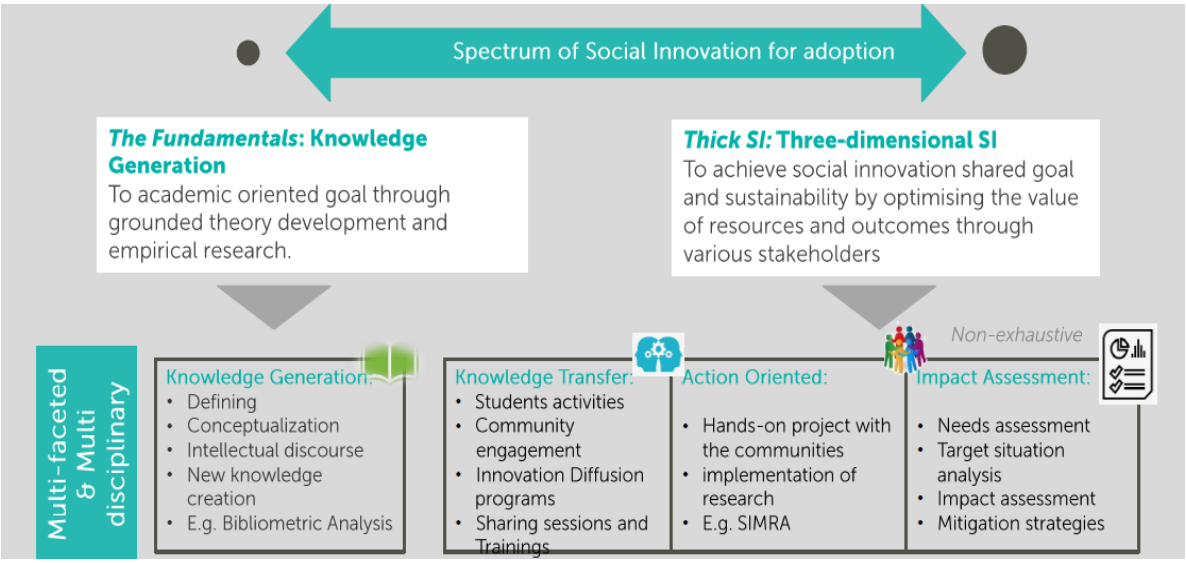


Figure 2: The Broad Spectrum of Social Innovation in Malaysia—from Knowledge Generation to Thick SI
Source: Author's own work

In summary, social innovation in Malaysia is not addressed by solely addressing technical solutions or programmatic outcomes. It requires an integrated framework that is relational and adaptive with multiple hands guiding the design, implementation, and evaluation processes, all driven by the power of strategic communication.

A Dynamic, Non-Linear Process

This spectrum of activity should not be considered as a fixed order. In reality, these phases tend to overlap, iterate, and shift. A project could transition from co-creation to discovery if the underlying assumptions turn out to be false, or during impact monitoring, new requirements may be identified. Hence, communication needs to be flexible and agile in order to facilitate evolution and adaptation, rather than enforcing fixed and static plans.

Crucially, this entire knowledge-to-impact journey depends on the ability of stakeholders to share language, negotiate meaning, and engage across power differentials. In this sense, communication acts as both an enabler and an equaliser.

Communication as the Core Connector

Social innovation encompasses a broad scope of activities, and at every stage, it requires seamless communication. From understanding pressing issues to achieving sustained impact, communication integrates diverse groups and people: social communities, scholarly and research bodies, corporate partners, and government agencies (Horgan & Dimitrijević, 2018). In addition to that, it merges all forms of knowledge, including scientific, local or regional, and

indigenous, transforming them into practical plans of action. The lack of imposition through communication ensures that innovation is not forced; instead, it is co-created.

In practice, communication aids in stakeholder alignment and elicits transparency alongside reciprocal learning. When well-implemented, it promotes participatory governance and builds confidence alongside trust towards the decision-maker(s). It can also facilitate behaviour change. On the contrary, neglecting communications can lead to a misunderstanding of an initiative, which could cause resistance or withdrawal from a project altogether. Therefore, in social innovation, outreach communication must be effective, but more importantly, relational strategies should be designed not merely for outreach, but for relationship-building and co-creation of shared meaning.

METHODOLOGY

Theoretical Anchors: Triple, Quadruple, and Quintuple Helix Models

This study employs a conceptual framework development approach rather than a conventional empirical methodology. The framework was constructed by synthesising insights from existing literature and the UTP case experience, instead of collecting new field data. Using established helix models as theoretical anchors and reflecting on practical lessons ensured that the proposed framework is both scholarly grounded and contextually relevant.

To ensure conceptual rigour, we followed scholarly best practices by systematically reviewing relevant literature and integrating those findings with field insights, thereby validating that the framework rests on a sound theoretical and practical foundation.

The traditional Triple Helix Model, as illustrated in Figure 3, comprising academia, industry, and government, is widely used in innovation ecosystems (Supriadi et al., 2024). In the Triple Helix context, communication channels facilitate the exchange of knowledge among academia, industry, and government, enabling them to align their goals. By actively facilitating dialogue among these three actors, communication ensures the helix's components collaborate effectively rather than operating in isolation. However, it is often ineffective for social innovations aimed at grassroots-level changes as it lacks mechanisms for embedding local knowledge, lived experiences, and environmental stewardship. Therefore, in this case, an expansion is required.

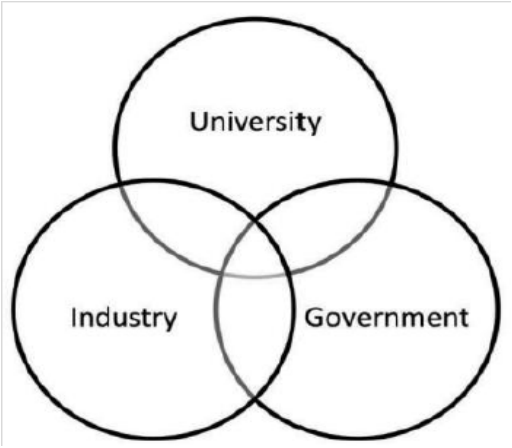


Figure 3: Triple Helix Model
Source: Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff (2000)

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To address these limitations, scholars have expanded the model. The Quadruple Helix Model (Figure 4) incorporates civil society or the community as a core partner, recognising that innovation must be developed with and for the people it aims to serve. In this expanded model, communication serves as the glue binding the new civil society layer to the traditional three helices. Open communication pathways allow community perspectives to be integrated with academic, industry, and government efforts, ensuring that innovation is co-created with the public and grounded in societal needs. In this framework, civil society contributes not just as a beneficiary but as an active participant and co-creator of knowledge and solutions (González-Martinez et al., 2021). Public discourse, social values, and user experience are foregrounded, making innovation more democratic and grounded in real-world needs (Höglund & Linton, 2018).

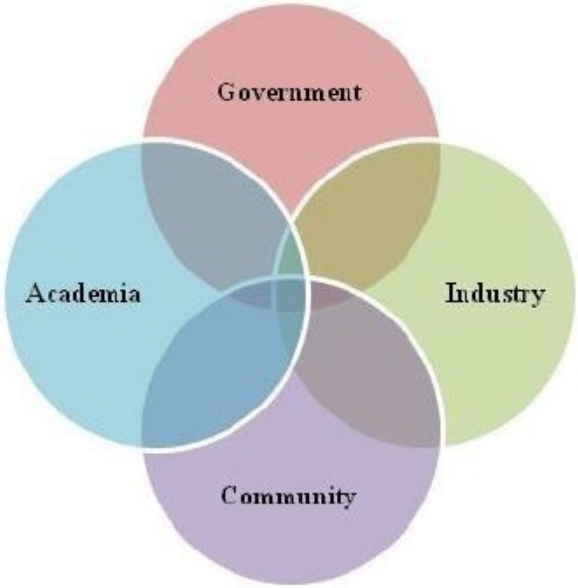


Figure 4: Quadruple Helix Model
Source: Carayannis and Campbell (2014) with Nordberg et al. (2020)

The Quintuple Helix Model (Figure 5) goes beyond this by including environmental considerations, which intertwine ecological as well as cultural dimensions, recognising that sustainable innovation must be environmentally embedded (Martini, 2023). Within a Quintuple Helix, communication incorporates environmental stakeholders and knowledge into the innovation dialogue. Continuous feedback loops between ecological experts, communities, and institutions ensure that sustainability and environmental insights actively shape innovation processes at every layer of the helix. This model reflects the need for socio-ecological alignment and long-term resilience. The environment is no longer treated as a passive backdrop, but as an active knowledge subsystem that influences and is influenced by innovation processes (Carayannis & Campbell, 2021).

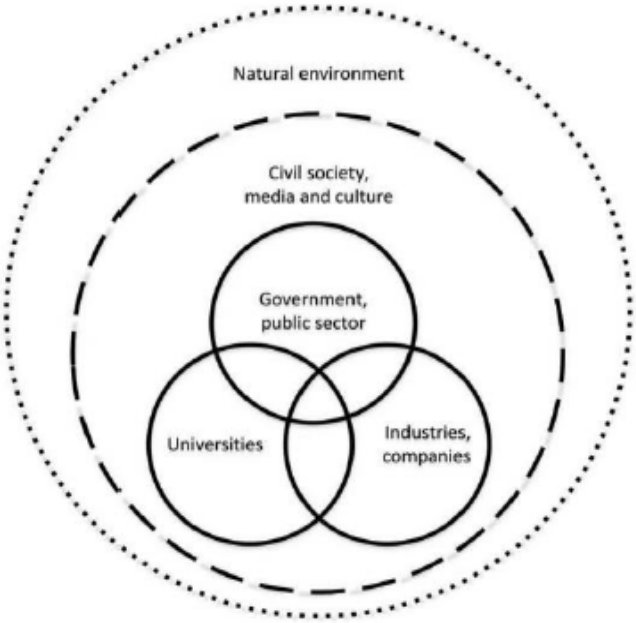


Figure 5: Quintuple Helix Model
Source: Carayannis and Campbell (2014) with Franc and Karadžija (2019)

This progression from Triple to Quintuple Helix reflects an evolution in thinking—from innovation as a technocratic pursuit to a transformational, participatory, and sustainability-oriented process. As shown in recent studies on smart cities and social enterprises, communication is the critical thread that links these helices—enabling shared understanding, co-creation, and collective impact across sectors (Paskaleva et al., 2021). The types of Helix Models are tabulated in Table 1.

Table 1: Helix models

Model	Stakeholders Involved
Triple Helix	Academia, Industry, Government
Quadruple Helix	+ Civil Society/Communities
Quintuple Helix	+ Environment (natural and cultural sustainability)

Source: Author's own work

Contemporary hybrid frameworks for social innovation have matured to accommodate the multifaceted nature of sustainability challenges. For instance, addressing water scarcity in a remote village demands not only engineering expertise (academia), investment (industry), and the quality of regulatory oversight (government), but also an attuned understanding of local customs (community), and a protective ethic towards watershed ecology (natural systems).

This study adopts the Quintuple Helix as a lens that resonates with the sociocultural landscape of communities across Malaysia. It reflects the interconnectedness of local wisdom, institutional collaboration, and environmental stewardship, especially in regions where indigenous cultures and biodiversity are deeply intertwined.

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Institutionalising Social Innovation: The UTP Experience

In 2014, Universiti Teknologi PETRONAS (UTP) established a dedicated Centre of Social Innovation (COSI), intending to systematise its engagement in societal advancement. Rather than serving as an empirical study, this institutional example is presented as foundational to the development of the conceptual framework proposed in this paper. The UTP experience offers a grounded context that illustrates how communication-centred strategies were integrated into innovation practice. The Centre focused on social business development, education for social change, and circular economy initiatives, laying the groundwork for an institution-wide shift from outreach-based community service to embedded, impact-oriented innovation. Recognising that meaningful societal transformation cannot occur through charity or outreach alone, COSI aimed to align research, education, and innovation with the long-term needs of society.

A strategic partnership with Nobel Laureate Professor Muhammad Yunus in 2016 formalised the creation of the Social Business for Community Development Unit, expanding the Centre's capacity and ambition. His collaboration introduced structured frameworks for sustainability, financial inclusion, community-driven entrepreneurship, and a paradigm shift from donor-dependent, unsustainable interventions to co-created, self-sustaining, community-empowering models. The new venture aimed to institutionalise transformative change by providing students, researchers, and communities with the tools and mindsets to drive systemic change in order to create long-lasting, scalable impact.

One of the key frameworks introduced through this collaboration was the Nobin Udyokta (NU) programme, originally conceptualised by Grameen to support youth entrepreneurship among second-generation borrowers of the Grameen Bank. UTP adapted the NU model to Malaysia's local context by identifying promising young talent from marginalised and rural areas and providing them with business mentorship, micro-financing, and systematic support for their ventures. This initiative ensured that UTP's social innovation efforts not only tackled immediate community concerns but also catalysed enduring socioeconomic transformation through community-based entrepreneurial self-sufficiency. By empowering young changemakers as community innovators, the NU adaptation demonstrated how university–community partnerships can bridge structural inequalities through sustainable, grassroots-driven enterprise (Ferdousi & Mahmud, 2019).

As depicted in Figure 7, the NU model is underpinned by Grameen's social business principles and microfinancing systems designed to aid young entrepreneurs via small-scale, interest-free investments and capacity-building support. This model reframes beneficiaries as investees and co-creators of value aligned with the ethos of empowerment embedded in UTP's social innovation philosophy.



Figure 6: Nobin Udyokta Model
Source: Author's own work

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The TULIP Project: Communication-Driven Grassroots Innovation

TULIP serves as a flagship project, standing as an example of social innovation that showcases how stakeholder collaboration and communication at various levels can translate institutional goals into grassroots change. It was initiated by Universiti Teknologi PETRONAS (UTP) and carried out in the remote highlands of Lawas, Sarawak, which is marked by difficult terrain, sparse infrastructure, and marginalised indigenous populations. TULIP aims to address persistent issues of poverty, underdevelopment, and limited market access.

It is the participatory and relational communication that sets TULIP apart. The initiative refuses to impose pre-defined solutions; instead, the UTP team applied a bottom-up, immersive approach by living with the Lun Bawang community over extended periods. Co-existing slowly eroded barriers and built trust, opening their eyes to cultural wisdoms, social hierarchies, and long-held local dreams. The dialogue-focused engagement enabled the community to voice what mattered most to them—dignity, autonomy, and sustainable income opportunities.

TULIP serves as a pragmatic realisation of the Quadruple Helix Model, where UTP (university), PETRONAS (industry), Yayasan Hasanah, and GIATMARA (government), as well as Peduli Insan and the indigenous Lun Bawang community (civil society), collaboratively co-create solutions. Communication served as a system that linked these stakeholders, enabling mutual goal alignment and continuous feedback loops. It ensured that solutions were not merely sound from a technical perspective and economically viable, but also socially accepted and culturally resonant.

LINAWA Coffee: A Case of Co-Created Indigenous Enterprise

One of TULIP's most notable innovations is LINAWA Coffee, which is a premium beverage that blends black Adan rice, an heirloom grain of cultural significance, with locally grown Arabica coffee beans. This was not a top-down imposed innovation but rather a bottom-up solution in response to a need. Members of the community narrated how black rice was once roasted and consumed during times of scarcity, and how the Arabica beans cultivated with assistance from the Department of Agriculture held untapped market value. Effective communication was essential in surfacing these narratives and integrating them into the product development process.

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The name "LINAWA", derived from the Lun Bawang language with the meaning “growth”, was chosen through community consultation, symbolising cultural pride and ownership. The local and ethnocultural identity of the place was preserved, as was the aesthetic appeal, throughout the branding and packaging design of the product, which underwent multiple rounds of feedback.

This product exemplifies grassroots social innovation: it was inspired by the people, co-developed with them, and designed to serve both economic and symbolic value. The collaboration extended to technical testing with the Malaysian Agricultural Research and Development Institute (MARDI), recipe formulation, shelf-life evaluation, and market readiness assessment.

Holistic Communication Strategy Across Scales

Beyond product innovation, the TULIP project implemented a comprehensive, cross-cutting communication framework to ensure alignment, involvement, and sustainability at all levels within the initiative. Internal communication among UTP researchers, students, and institutional partners fostered clarity of roles, streamlined coordination, and facilitated iterative learning throughout the project lifecycle. At the interpersonal level, the actively engaging locals facilitated the co-design approach, the exchange of knowledge, and emotional engagement, which helps in building bonds and ownership. Meanwhile, institutional communication with government agencies and financiers, such as PETRONAS, helped align expectations, secure enduring project sponsorship, and embed the initiative within overarching national development frameworks and agendas.

Communication was not an afterthought but an active driver of co-creation. It facilitated capacity-building workshops on entrepreneurial skills, financial literacy, product development, and cooperative governance, each tailored to the community’s literacy levels and cultural norms.

Ownership Through Cooperative Development

One of the project’s most significant outcomes was the formation of a community cooperative, which enabled formalised ownership, governance, and income distribution for the LINAWA coffee business. This cooperative structure ensured:

- Equitable income distribution;
- Local governance and accountability;
- Community-led decision-making for scaling or diversifying products.

This institutional mechanism reinforced co-ownership, helping transition the community from passive recipients to active entrepreneurs.

A Communication-Centred Framework for Social Innovation

Drawing from the TULIP experience and similar grassroots social innovation initiatives, this study introduces a Communication-Centred Framework that places communication at the heart of each phase of the innovation lifecycle. Unlike traditional models that treat communication as a tool for dissemination or public relations, this framework reframes it as a strategic infrastructure, essential for building trust, sustaining engagement, and enabling adaptive learning. The framework consists of five interlinked phases, all held together by multidirectional, culturally responsive communication.

a) Listening and Discovery

The process begins with listening and discovery, where institutions and facilitators must suspend their assumptions and immerse themselves in the community's realities. Ethnographic approaches such as participant observation, informal storytelling, and in-situ dialogues allow social innovators to uncover lived experiences, hidden capacities, and contextual constraints. This stage is crucial for building trust and surfacing insights that are not visible through conventional needs assessments.

In TULIP, this phase was actualised through researchers living with the Lun Bawang community, observing rituals, food practices, and everyday routines. Communication during this phase was not about extracting information but about relational engagement and mutual sense-making.

b) Co-Creation and Design

The second phase focuses on co-creation and design. It is a participatory process where ideas are collaboratively explored, tested, and refined. Unlike consultation-based models, co-creation empowers community members as co-designers. Effective communication encompasses inclusive facilitation, visual ideation tools, and open feedback loops that enable all voices to contribute to shaping the solution.

In the case of LINAWA coffee, co-creation involved recipe formulation, packaging design, and brand naming, all of which were co-developed through iterative conversations and design trials with the community. This phase was critical for ensuring both functional success and cultural resonance.

c) Capacity Building

Once a solution is co-designed, the third phase centres on capacity building. This involves transferring skills, knowledge, and leadership capabilities to the community, enabling them to take ownership of implementation and scaling. Here, communication must be educational, adaptive, and culturally sensitive.

Workshops on entrepreneurship, marketing, and cooperative governance in TULIP were delivered in the Lun Bawang dialect, using analogies and storytelling to enhance comprehension. The pedagogical communication style was relational rather than transactional, supporting confidence-building and participation from women and youth.

d) Strategic Storytelling and Advocacy

The fourth phase emphasises strategic storytelling, which serves both internal and external functions. Internally, storytelling fosters community pride and narrative continuity. Externally, it amplifies the voices of marginalised communities, attracts allies, and legitimises the innovation.

In TULIP, the name “LINAWA” became a powerful symbol of identity, while its story, which is rooted in cultural resilience and co-creation, was shared through digital platforms, exhibitions, and stakeholder briefings. This narrative strategy helped garner national recognition and financial support. Communication at this stage blends emotional resonance, strategic framing, and media literacy.

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e) Impact Monitoring and Reflexive Learning

The final phase is impact monitoring, where feedback mechanisms enable projects to evolve based on evidence and lived experience. Communication in this stage must be reflexive, transparent, and cyclical. It involves not only tracking metrics but enabling beneficiaries to participate in evaluating outcomes and redefining success.

In TULIP, community members were consulted on sales performance, quality control, and customer feedback. This informed adjustments in production and packaging. The cooperative's regular meetings institutionalised a culture of listening back, closing the loop between innovation and impact.

f) Communication as Connective Tissue

Across all five phases, communication functions as the connective tissue. It is not an add-on but the very fabric through which collaboration, trust, and transformation unfold. Whether verbal or non-verbal, interpersonal or digital, strategic or spontaneous, communication sustains inclusion, coordinates complexity, and ensures that innovation remains grounded in context and responsive to change (Durward et al., 2020; Leimeister & Blohm, 2022).

As shown in the TULIP model, the success of social innovation is not determined solely by the novelty of the idea, but by how well the idea is shared, understood, embraced, and adapted. Communication turns projects into movements, ideas into action, and stakeholders into co-owners.

CONCLUSION

Social innovation represents more than a set of technical solutions or project-based interventions; it is a dynamic, relational process that seeks to empower communities, transform systems, and generate inclusive and sustainable outcomes. Drawing on the TULIP initiative and broader theoretical insights, this paper illustrates how communication serves as the core infrastructure that binds together the various components of social innovation. Whether through immersive listening, co-creation workshops, strategic storytelling, or reflexive feedback loops, communication plays a transformative role at each phase of the innovation journey. When communication is treated as an active enabler rather than a support function, social innovation becomes more responsive to local knowledge, more legitimate in the eyes of communities, and more resilient in the face of evolving challenges. The TULIP experience demonstrates that by building relationships before designing solutions and facilitating dialogue rather than directing outcomes, innovation can become a collaborative and culturally rooted force for change that reflects community values and drives lasting transformation. As social innovation evolves in complexity and scope, the centrality of communication must not be underestimated. It enables not just project implementation but also facilitates long-term cultural alignment, adaptive learning, and systemic transformation. Recognising it as the backbone of equitable, inclusive, and locally resonant change, institutions must not only invest in innovation infrastructure but also in communicative capacity.

Implications of the Study

To realise this communication-centred vision of social innovation at scale, several strategic shifts are needed. Institutions—whether academic, corporate, or governmental—must embed communication planning as a foundational component in their innovation strategies, ensuring adequate time, funding, and expertise are allocated to engagement processes.

Innovation teams should be equipped not only with technical or managerial skills, but also with competencies in participatory communication, narrative framing, intercultural facilitation, and ethical listening. Incorporating communication experts or trained facilitators early in the innovation lifecycle can improve stakeholder onboarding, reduce project friction, and foster deeper relational trust. Community-based communication protocols, co-developed with stakeholders, can enhance trust, clarify expectations, and enable equitable participation across literacy, language, and power divides.

Additionally, monitoring and evaluation frameworks should go beyond output-based indicators to include relational metrics such as trust-building, story ownership, and stakeholder satisfaction. Ultimately, when communication is institutionalised as a cross-cutting, strategic practice, social innovation becomes a space where people, ideas, and systems evolve together towards outcomes that are not only impactful but also just, inclusive, and deeply meaningful.

It ensures that innovation initiatives remain rooted in lived experiences and adapt meaningfully to local realities. In summary, this paper offers a novel framework that places communication at the heart of social innovation practice. By reframing communication as the central infrastructure of innovation, the study fills a critical gap in the literature. This contribution bridges the gap between communication theory and social innovation, providing a new lens for practitioners and researchers to achieve more inclusive and lasting social impact.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This paper is of a conceptual nature and is based on a single, specific institutional experience: the TULIP initiative from UTP. Although this case is insightful about the role of communication in social innovation, it does not emerge from systematic empirical investigation. Therefore, the proposed Communication-Centred Framework, while theoretically robust and informed by practice, needs further empirical validation in diverse sociocultural and organisational settings.

As this paper is grounded in a single institutional case, its scope is limited in terms of generalisability across wider geographic and policy contexts. Future research can aim to refine the framework through empirical investigation using comparative case studies across different regions, innovation types, and stakeholder configurations. The impact of communication can be assessed across all five framework phases using both quantitative and qualitative techniques, with a focus on stakeholder participation, trust, adaptive capacity, and sustainability. Examining the application of the framework in digitally mediated contexts or vulnerable communities would further demonstrate its adaptability and potential for scalability.

In addition, longitudinal field studies could be conducted to track the framework's implementation over time, observing how communication dynamics evolve and sustain impact in a community. Such longitudinal research, alongside cross-case comparative studies, would provide deeper insight into the framework's effectiveness and guide its refinement across different contexts.

Exploring the role of communication installed or failed social innovation efforts would deepen understanding of relational process breakdowns. Shifting the focus from 'successful' cases allows research to contribute to building a more sophisticated, critical, and robust theory of communication in social innovation.

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