



Research Article

Informal Leadership and Infrastructure Development: The Role of *Tungku Tigo Sajarangan* in the Batang Agam Hydropower Project (1965–1976)

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Abstract

This study examines the patterns and forms of support provided by the informal leadership institution of *Tungku Tigo Sajarangan* in Koto Tengah, Akabiluru District, Lima Puluh Kota Regency, during the development of the Batang Agam Hydroelectric Power Plant (PLTA Batang Agam) in Indonesia's New Order period. Using the historical research method, this article explores the strategies adopted by government authorities and project managers to engage informal leaders at the *nagari* level where the project was implemented. The findings show that persuasive and empathetic approaches toward local landowning communities significantly facilitated project implementation. Rather than generating resistance, the Batang Agam hydropower project received broad support and active participation from the local population, mediated through the authority of *Tungku Tigo Sajarangan*. This case offers valuable historical insights for addressing contemporary land acquisition conflicts through inclusive, culturally grounded, and participatory approaches.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, numerous complaints have emerged about obstacles to implementing national development programs in West Sumatra. One example is the construction of the Padang–Sicincin toll road, a 36.6-kilometer infrastructure project that took nearly 7 years to complete. Another case concerns community resistance in several *nagari* around Lake Singkarak against the proposed development of a solar power plant ([Kompas.id](https://kompas.id), 15 January 2025).

Difficulties in land acquisition for development purposes have long been regarded as a persistent issue in West Sumatra. The communal land tenure system (*tanah ulayat*) is frequently cited as a major impediment to physical development projects. In Minangkabau society, land is generally owned collectively by kinship groups (*kaum*) rather than by individuals. As a result, reaching consensus among group members to transfer communal land to external parties, including the state, is often challenging. This condition has contributed to a prevailing stigma that Minangkabau socio-cultural systems are incompatible with economic development (Yusra, [2011](#)).

However, the root of the problem does not lie solely in the communal land system itself, but also in the attitudes and approaches adopted by policymakers and development implementers. State officials, as formal leaders, are often perceived as insufficiently sensitive to local aspirations and disconnected from community concerns (Khumairoh et al., [2022](#)).

Historical experience suggests that during the New Order period, the Indonesian government was relatively more successful in implementing strategic national projects in West Sumatra. Examples include the Batang Agam Hydroelectric Power Plant in Lima Puluh Kota, the Trans-Sumatra highway segment in Sijunjung, and transmigration programs in several regions. Although the socio-political context of that era differed markedly from the present, government policies—particularly their implementation strategies—were more adaptive to local social conditions (Israr, [2024](#)).

One of the most effective social agents supporting New Order development agendas at the community level in Minangkabau society was the informal leadership institution known as *Tungku Tigo Sajarangan*, consisting of *ninik mamak* customary leaders, *alim ulama* religious scholars, and *cadiak*

pandai intellectuals. Before the implementation of the Batang Agam project, government officials and project leaders engaged extensively with local communities, conducting repeated dialogues with informal leaders to emphasize the project's importance for regional development. Through culturally attuned approaches, local communities shifted from potential resistance or apathy to active support for the project (El-Gumanti, [1997](#)).

Studies on informal leadership in West Sumatra have developed significantly since the Reformasi era, particularly in highlighting the strategic role of Minangkabau customary actors amid ongoing social transformations and development policies. Early scholarship positions the *penghulu* as a central figure within the Minangkabau social structure, especially in maintaining the sustainability of *tanah ulayat*. The *penghulu*, as the leader of a *kaum* or matrilineal clan, holds normative authority in regulating the use and transfer of communal land through customary mechanisms institutionalized in the regulations of the *Kerapatan Adat Nagari*. These regulations restrict land transactions to specific conditions and prioritize actors within close kinship networks, thereby functioning as instruments for safeguarding the continuity of communal assets.

Subsequent studies indicate a shift in focus toward the relationship between informal leadership and infrastructure development projects. Khumairoh et al. ([2022](#)), in their study of land acquisition for the Padang–Sicincin toll road project, find that the primary obstacle lies in weak communication between *ninik mamak*—as holders of customary authority—and formal stakeholders, including local governments, the Ministry of Public Works, and contractors. Asymmetrical power relations in the negotiation process further exacerbated the situation, even compelling some customary leaders to pursue legal action independently. These findings point to an institutional gap in which the state has not fully accommodated the strategic role and position of informal leadership within development processes.

In line with this argument, Mulyana ([2023](#)) underscores the decisive influence of *ninik mamak* in decision-making regarding land acquisition, particularly in the Padang–Pekanbaru toll road project within the framework of *Tungku Tigo Sajarangan*. *Ninik mamak* function not merely as symbolic bearers of customary authority but also as key actors in determining the social legitimacy of development policies. Their involvement, therefore, cannot be treated as peripheral; rather, it must be recognized as integral to both policy formulation and implementation.

Overall, the literature suggests that challenges in implementing development policies in West Sumatra often stem from a misalignment between the state's technocratic approaches and local communities' socio-cultural values. In this context, informal leadership serves not only as a mediator but also as a determinant of social legitimacy. Comparative accounts also indicate that during the New Order period, local government leaders tended to adopt more personal and culturally adaptive approaches, which helped minimize conflict in land acquisition processes. This review, therefore, underscores the importance of integrating formal and informal approaches into development policy, particularly in regions with strong customary social structures, such as West Sumatra.

Based on these gaps in the literature, this article addresses the following research questions: (1) How did interactions between informal leaders and formal state actors take shape in the land acquisition process for the Batang Agam hydropower project? (2) What factors enabled communication and negotiation between these actors? (3) How did informal leadership shape the social legitimacy of infrastructure development policies? (4) To what extent did local government approaches during the New Order period differ from contemporary approaches in managing relations with customary leaders? and (5) what models of integration are most effective in synergizing formal and informal leadership within development processes in the Minangkabau customary society?

METHOD

This study employs the historical research method (Sjamsuddin, [2007](#)) and a descriptive-analytical qualitative approach commonly used in the social sciences (Irawan, [2006](#)). This approach analyzes the political, social, and cultural dynamics of West Sumatra during the New Order period to reconstruct

social realities and cultural meanings by attending to processes of interaction and the authenticity of historical sources.

The research was primarily conducted in Koto Tangah, Lima Puluh Kota Regency, as the main site for collecting primary and secondary sources. Secondary data were obtained from books and scholarly journals accessed in Padang and Bukittinggi, as well as from the researcher's personal collections. Primary data consisted of interviews with key informants, including community leaders of Koto Tangah, former project officials, and various archival documents. These archival sources include contemporary newspapers published in Padang during the 1970s, such as *Aman Makmur* and *Singgaling*, which reported on the Batang Agam Hydroelectric Power Plant project, including policy dynamics, responses from local communities and government officials, and land acquisition processes.

In addition, this study uses land-related documents owned by community leaders in Koto Tangah and associated with the project site, such as cadastral maps, certificates of land ownership or tenure, and administrative records related to land acquisition. Other relevant documents, including local government reports, meeting minutes, and institutional archives, were also used to support a comprehensive reconstruction of events.

Key informants were selected based on several criteria relevant to the research focus. First, informants were individuals who were directly or indirectly involved in the planning, implementation, or impacts of the Batang Agam Hydroelectric Power Plant project during the New Order period. Masni Kamal, for instance, was one of the senior officials involved in the PLTA Batang Agam project. Second, informants held strategic social or institutional positions, such as *ninik mamak* or prominent community figures with in-depth knowledge of policy dynamics and state–society relations. Nasrun Tahar, for example, is a customary community leader from Koto Tangah who served as one of the key informants in this research. Third, informants had lived experience of the period under study and could reflect on events in a narrative and critical manner. In addition to these key informants, the researcher also conducted random interviews with several anonymous individuals in Koto Tangah and Batuhampana to capture broader community perspectives.

The selection of informants was conducted using purposive and snowball sampling. These techniques enabled the researcher to identify key informants with substantial knowledge while gradually expanding the network of respondents. Interviews were conducted using a structured set of questions to ensure consistency and depth of data while allowing flexibility to explore emerging information during the interviews.

Following data collection, source criticism was conducted in two stages. External criticism was used to distinguish valid sources from less reliable ones, while internal criticism involved cross-checking among sources. The subsequent stage involved interpretation and analysis to identify logical relationships between the research problems and the available evidence. These findings were then synthesized into a historical narrative (Sjamsuddin, [2007](#)).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Batang Agam River and Electricity Development

The hydropower potential of the Batang Agam River had already been identified during the Dutch East Indies colonial period. Originating in the Agam Valley and flowing through the Lima Puluh Kota region, the river was recognized for its relatively stable discharge and suitability for electricity generation. Nevertheless, colonial initiatives remained confined to preliminary assessments and exploratory surveys, without progressing to actual construction or implementation (El-Gumanti, [1997](#)).

Substantive efforts to utilize this potential emerged only after Indonesian independence, particularly during the 1960s. The Batang Agam Hydroelectric Power Plant was incorporated into the 1960–1969 Universal Planned Program formulated by the National Planning Council (*Dewan Perancang Nasional*, Depernas), alongside other major hydropower projects such as Sigura-Gura in North Sumatra and Jatiluhur in West Java. These projects reflected the state's ambition to accelerate

national development through large-scale infrastructure. However, the severe fiscal crisis that marked the final years of the Guided Democracy era forced the government to reassess many development initiatives. Consequently, the Batang Agam project was relegated to non-priority status and faced the possibility of termination (El-Gumanti, [1997](#)).

A turning point occurred when Yanuar Muin, a young technical staff member at the Department of Public Works and Energy, argued that the Batang Agam project remained strategically important and technically viable. During an internal meeting chaired by Minister Suprayogi, Yanuar presented a series of arguments emphasizing the project's long-term benefits and feasibility. His position was ultimately accepted, and he was subsequently appointed as project leader. With this mandate, Yanuar was assigned to West Sumatra in early 1965 and tasked specifically with reviving and advancing the stalled hydropower project (El-Gumanti, [1997](#)).

Upon his arrival, Yanuar consulted Governor Kaharuddin Datuk Rangkayo Basa in Padang. As the first governor of West Sumatra after the PRRI conflict of 1958–1961, Kaharuddin was actively engaged in restoring regional stability and development. He strongly encouraged the continuation of the Batang Agam project as part of a broader effort to revitalize the province. Support for the project also came from regional military authorities, underscoring the alignment between civil and security leadership in promoting development initiatives during this period (Chaniago & Jasmi, [1998](#)).

When Yanuar inspected the project site in Koto Tangah Batuhampa, Lima Puluh Kota, he found conditions indicating prolonged stagnation. The project facilities resembled a storage warehouse rather than an active construction site. They were staffed by only eight permanent employees and fifteen contract workers, and equipped with a single aging jeep for transportation. These circumstances reflected the minimal progress achieved before his arrival (El-Gumanti, [1997](#)).

According to Nasrun Tahar Datuk Baringin, a local community leader and former PLN employee, approximately 0.5 hectares of land had already been secured at the project site during the early stages of development. He noted that this land was likely acquired by the state under coercive conditions, reflecting the repressive political climate that prevailed in the aftermath of the suppression of PRRI in the region (Interview with Nasrun Tahar, 2025).

Electricity Before the PLTA Batang Agam

In the aftermath of PRRI, physical infrastructure across West Sumatra deteriorated severely, and this condition persisted well into the late 1960s. Efforts to rehabilitate and reconstruct the region were constrained by acute financial limitations at both the central and regional levels. Local governments operated with extremely restricted budgets and remained largely dependent on transfers from the central government, which itself faced serious fiscal pressure. In the early post-PRRI period, approximately 75 percent of regional government revenues came from central government assistance, underscoring the region's limited financial autonomy (Kamaluddin, [1971](#), p. 3). For instance, the total budget available to the West Sumatra regional government amounted to only 382 million rupiah, a figure insufficient to support comprehensive infrastructure development.

The electricity sector clearly reflected the province's broader underdevelopment. In Padang, the provincial capital, electricity supply was highly unreliable, with power available for only one day, followed by outages lasting up to 10 days. Public lighting was frequently dim, and many daily activities were conducted with little or no access to electricity. In religious settings, such as mosques, loudspeakers for calls to prayer and sermons often relied on batteries rather than grid electricity (El-Gumanti, [1997](#)). Conditions in Bukittinggi, the former capital of the Republic of Indonesia, were even more severe, with electricity reportedly available for only one day, followed by outages lasting up to twenty days. In rural areas, the lack of electricity reinforced perceptions that communities remained trapped in extreme underdevelopment (*Aman Makmur*, [28 April 1968](#)).

These chronic shortages were largely attributable to the province's very limited power generation capacity. In the Bukittinggi region, the state electricity company, PLN, depended almost exclusively on a diesel power plant (*Pembangkit Listrik Tenaga Diesel*, PLTD) located in Padang Luar, which was unable to meet growing demand (Interview with Nasrun Tahar, 2025). As a result, the

instability of electricity supply became a structural constraint on economic activity and social development.

The unreliable electricity infrastructure also had broader socioeconomic consequences. Investors were reluctant to commit capital to the region due to uncertainty about basic utilities. Similarly, many Minangkabau migrants showed little interest in returning to their places of origin, except for short visits related to ancestral or familial obligations. Reflecting on these conditions, Minangkabau journalist Rosihan Anwar, writing from Jakarta during his coverage of a “return to hometown” visit in the late 1960s, described electricity as one of West Sumatra’s most pressing problems. He highlighted frequent, prolonged blackouts, noting that the province required approximately 10,000 kilowatts of electricity but could only produce around 3,500 kilowatts. Anwar also reported the arrival of several diesel generators from the United States in April 1968, intended to alleviate electricity shortages in major urban centers such as Padang, Bukittinggi, Payakumbuh, and Padang Panjang (*Aman Makmur*, [27 February 1968](#)).

Based on these accounts, it appears that Anwar did not consider the Batang Agam Hydroelectric Power Plant project, whose planning had already commenced during Sukarno’s presidency. This suggests a gap between public discourse and ongoing state development initiatives.

Entering the *Pelita* Program

The transition of political leadership at both national and regional levels in the latter half of the 1960s significantly influenced the trajectory of the Batang Agam Hydroelectric Power Plant project (El-Gumanti, [1997](#)). After a prolonged and complex negotiation process, project leader Yanuar Muin secured the project’s inclusion in the New Order government’s Five-Year Development Plan (*Repelita*), which formally began in 1969 (Booth & McCawley, [1982](#)). Before this decision, the Batang Agam project had faced a serious risk of exclusion from the national development agenda.

This precarious situation was later acknowledged by Minister of Public Works and Housing Sutami, who noted retrospectively that the project had been on the verge of cancellation at the outset of Repelita I. He emphasized that sustained advocacy by those directly involved in the project, particularly Engineer Yanuar Muin, ultimately persuaded the government to proceed with its implementation (*Angkatan Bersenjata*, [1976](#)). Such recognition underscores the importance of individual agency within the broader framework of centralized development planning during the early New Order period.

The formal incorporation of the Batang Agam Hydroelectric Power Plant into the Five-Year Development Plan revitalized morale among project personnel and marked a turning point in its institutional standing. This achievement was widely perceived as the outcome of persistent lobbying efforts directed at key decision-makers within the central government. In addition to Yanuar Muin, several West Sumatran officials played active roles in advocating for the project’s continuation and securing its allocation within the state budget. Among the most prominent supporters was Governor Harun Zain, who viewed the completion of the Batang Agam project as integral to his broader agenda of rehabilitating and revitalizing West Sumatra after years of economic and infrastructural decline (Israr, [2024](#)).

As a multi-year infrastructure undertaking, the Batang Agam Hydroelectric Power Plant required the submission of annual funding proposals to the central government. In this context, the project benefited substantially from the involvement of academic experts from Andalas University, led by economist Hendra Esmara, who contributed to the preparation of comprehensive feasibility studies. These studies strengthened the project’s technical and economic justification, thereby enhancing its credibility among policymakers and international financiers. In 1971, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) agreed to provide financial support for the Batang Agam project. Beyond funding physical construction, the ADB also supplied technical expertise, further reinforcing the project’s implementation capacity and institutional sustainability (*Aman Makmur*, [1971](#)).

Hydropower Plant Management Approach

Beyond technical constraints and financial limitations, the most decisive challenge faced by the Batang Agam Hydroelectric Power Plant project lay in securing social legitimacy, particularly regarding the appropriation of customary (*adat*) land. Within the centralized and developmentalist framework of the New Order, infrastructure projects functioned not only as economic interventions but also as instruments of political consolidation through which the state sought to extend its authority into local arenas. Consequently, the project's success depended not only on formal planning mechanisms but also on the state's capacity—mediated by field-level actors—to negotiate, accommodate, and align local socio-cultural structures with national development agendas. In this regard, Yanuar Muin's role must be situated within a dual context: as both a beneficiary of New Order institutional support, characterized by political stability, centralized authority, and resource mobilization, and as an agent capable of translating state objectives into locally acceptable forms.

This interpretation is reinforced by Saafoedin Bahar's account, which situates Yanuar's effectiveness within the broader political economy of the New Order. As Chairman of Golkar in West Sumatra during the early 1970s, Bahar emphasized that development projects such as PLTA Batang Agam were integral to the regime's strategy of legitimization, with Golkar acting as the primary vehicle for political consolidation. From this perspective, Yanuar's achievements cannot be understood merely as individual success. Rather, they formed part of a systemic process in which development outcomes were instrumentalized to reinforce state authority. His capacity to manage land-related tensions—traditionally a major source of resistance in state-led projects—demonstrates how political legitimacy at the local level was often contingent upon interpersonal negotiation rather than coercive enforcement. The gradual electrification of previously isolated areas contributed to regional economic transformation while simultaneously deepening the state's penetration into everyday social life (Bahar, [2018](#)).

Biographical accounts further reveal that Yanuar's strategy represented a pragmatic recalibration of state power in the face of the resilience of customary authority structures. Although the formal apparatus of the state retained coercive potential, its application in *adat*-based societies risked generating resistance and undermining the long-term sustainability of the project. Yanuar's emphasis on building alliances with *ninik mamak*, *alim ulama*, and *cadiak pandai*, therefore, reflects not merely cultural sensitivity but also a strategic recognition of the limits of bureaucratic authority. His dialogical approach can thus be interpreted as a form of negotiated governance, in which state agendas were reframed through locally resonant narratives of collective progress and regional advancement (El-Gumanti, [1997](#)). This suggests that the operational success of New Order development policies was often predicated on informal processes of translation and mediation at the grassroots level.

Yanuar's leadership style further illustrates the interplay between structure and agency. His adaptive and communicative approach, informed by the Minangkabau concept of *jalan nan ampek*, enabled him to navigate the relatively egalitarian and discursive character of local society. This stood in contrast to the rigid, hierarchical logic of the New Order bureaucracy, highlighting a disjuncture between formal governance structures and lived social realities. Rather than imposing top-down authority, Yanuar embedded himself within existing social networks, thereby converting cultural competence into political capital. His success, therefore, derived not only from the regime's structural backing but also from his ability to strategically appropriate local norms as instruments of governance (El-Gumanti, [1997](#)).

The use of mosques and *surau* as sites of engagement further underscores the adaptive dimension of Yanuar's approach. In a political context where formal public spaces were tightly regulated, these religious institutions provided alternative arenas for deliberation that were both socially legitimate and relatively autonomous from direct state control. By participating in religious activities and delivering sermons, Yanuar blurred the boundary between bureaucratic authority and moral leadership, thereby enhancing his credibility and fostering trust. This strategy reflects a subtle form of depoliticization, in which potentially contentious development agendas were reframed within ethical and communal discourses, reducing the likelihood of open resistance.

Finally, Yanuar's restrained engagement with partisan politics reveals an important nuance in the functioning of New Order power. Although formally aligned with Golkar, he did not rely on overt political mobilization or coercion to secure compliance. His tolerance toward alternative political affiliations at the local level suggests that effective governance in this context was achieved more through the cultivation of social trust and legitimacy than through direct political intervention. Nevertheless, this apparent autonomy should not obscure the structural reality that such localized successes ultimately fed into the broader project of regime consolidation. In this sense, Yanuar Muin's leadership exemplifies how individual agency operated within—and contributed to—the reproduction of the New Order political order, where development served simultaneously as a tool of material progress and a mechanism of political control (Interview with Nasrun Tahar, 2025).

Community Involvement

Local community support for the construction of the Batang Agam Hydroelectric Power Plant manifested in multiple forms, ranging from the transfer of land rights and participation in project labor to the provision of construction materials and related services. Regarding land acquisition, most residents demonstrated a cooperative attitude and were generally willing to release their land for use by the state electricity company, PLN.

To facilitate this process, PLN established a land acquisition team that included representatives from the local community, thereby enhancing transparency and mutual trust. In total, approximately five hectares of land in Nagari Koto Tangah, along with a smaller area in Padang Tarok, were allocated for the project's core facilities. In most cases, landowners received compensation from the state in accordance with prevailing regulations. However, several residents chose to relinquish their land voluntarily without compensation, reflecting a strong sense of collective commitment to the project.

The land contributed by residents included agricultural fields, gardens, rice paddies, and hilly and valley terrain, some of which had already been planted with productive crops. Notably, several individuals from the Chaniago clan in Koto Tangah, including Nurhayati and Datuk Hijau, voluntarily donated their land to support the construction of the hydropower plant (Interview with Nasrun Tahar, 2025).

Table 1. Residents of Koto Tangah, whose land was compensated for the PLTA Batang Agam, 1973

No.	Name	Land Area Paid for
1	St. Suin	1560 m ²
2	Dt. B. Diatch	7160 m ²
3	St. Pamuncak	2880 m ²
4	Dt. Rajo Endah	4990 m ²
5	Jarun	1951 m ²
6	Dt. Gonjong	2378 m ²

Source: PLTA Batang Agam (1973)

Data on community participation in land provision for the Batang Agam Hydroelectric Power Plant indicate the direct involvement of Koto Tangah residents in supporting project implementation. At least six individuals were recorded as having relinquished portions of their land: St. Suin (1,560 m²), Dt. B. Diatch (7,160 m²), St. Pamuncak (2,880 m²), Dt. Rajo Endah (4,990 m²), Jarun (1,951 m²), and Dt. Gonjong (2,378 m²). These contributions not only reflect the material sacrifices made by local communities but also indicate a degree of acceptance of the government-led development project. Within the context of Minangkabau society, which adheres to an *adat*-based land tenure system, land transfers involve a complex process of social and cultural negotiation that requires the consent of various customary stakeholders. This evidence demonstrates that the active participation of local communities also contributed to the success of the Batang Agam PLTA project through their contributions of agrarian resources (PLTA Batang Agam, 1973).

This pattern of participation extended beyond land contributions into the project's institutional structure. Community leaders from Koto Tangah were actively incorporated into the implementation of the Batang Agam PLTA. Among them was a *datuk*, or traditional village leader, who was appointed as the project's head of security. In carrying out this responsibility, he coordinated directly with law

enforcement authorities and assigned police officers to serve as official security personnel at the project site. This arrangement remained in place throughout the construction period. It continued until the project's completion in 1976, illustrating how local authority figures were not only participants but also integral actors in ensuring the stability and continuity of the development process.

Local participation was also evident in the involvement of a substantial number of residents as contractors and service providers. Approximately 100 locally based companies (*CVs*) partnered with the project, particularly in supplying construction materials and related services. Except for tunnel excavation, which required specialized labor drawn from the Ombilin coal mining workforce, most construction activities were undertaken by local laborers. These included work on key project components such as the dam, reservoir, ropeway system, staff housing, and warehouse facilities. Residents were engaged not only as carpenters and daily laborers but also as administrative staff, contractors, and members of the project management team. Individuals such as Masni Kamal, Nasrun Tahar, and several others exemplify the involvement of local personnel in both operational and managerial roles within the project (Interview with Masni Kamal, 2025).

In parallel with the construction of the hydropower plant, PLN contributed to broader village development initiatives. The company participated in the development of various public and social infrastructure projects, including the construction of kindergartens, elementary schools, and other community facilities. PLN also played a significant role in supporting the construction of the Ar-Rahmah Mosque in Koto Tengah, located adjacent to the hydropower plant site. These initiatives highlight the integration of infrastructure development with community-oriented programs during the implementation of the PLTA Batang Agam project.

Completion of the PLTA Batang Agam

By 1974, construction of the PLTA Batang Agam had reached an advanced stage, with most of its physical components nearing completion. Key facilities, including the reservoir, water conveyance tunnel, and sand basin, had already been completed, leaving only the installation of the powerhouse outstanding at that time (Interview with Nasrun Tahar, 2025). The near completion of the project marked a significant milestone not only for those directly involved in its implementation but also for the broader West Sumatra population.

“The transformation of the Batang Agam Valley into a major infrastructure site left a lasting impression on public perception. Formerly known as a recreational area frequently visited by students and youth groups from various parts of the province, the valley gradually acquired a new identity as the location of a major hydropower installation. In 1974, *Tempo* magazine captured this shift by noting that visitors could no longer merely enjoy the natural scenery and cool highland climate. Still, it was also confronted with tangible evidence of technological advancement embodied in the PLTA Batang Agam” (*Cara Presiden Soeharto Mencapai Swasembada Beras*, PDAT, 2019).

Following the completion and installation of the powerhouse—the facility housing turbines and generators for electricity production—the Batang Agam Hydroelectric Power Plant was officially inaugurated in April 1976. The ceremony was presided over by the Minister of Public Works and Housing, Ir. Sutami, attended by provincial, district, and municipal officials, project personnel, community leaders, and residents. A symbolic moment during the event underscored the project's significance: Minister Sutami publicly embraced and lifted project leader Yanuar Muin in recognition of his perseverance and success in fulfilling the commitment to complete the project (*Singgalang*, 1976).

Construction of the Batang Agam Hydroelectric Power Plant commenced in 1969 and spanned approximately 7 years, culminating in a total project cost of approximately USD 8 million. In his inaugural address, Minister Sutami emphasized that the completion of the project demonstrated the capacity of Indonesian engineers and institutions in Sumatra to plan and execute large-scale infrastructure projects valued at more than three billion rupiah. He recalled that the project faced the risk of cancellation at the outset of Repelita I, but was ultimately sustained through the persistent efforts of those involved in its implementation. A feasibility study conducted in 1971 by Lahmeyer International produced findings largely consistent with earlier Indonesian assessments, thereby

providing a sound technical basis for the project's continuation and facilitating access to financing from the Asian Development Bank. Sutami further noted that, with an initial installed capacity of 2 x 3.3 MW, the project not only contributed to electricity generation but also represented a substantial investment in technical knowledge and professional expertise. This accumulation of skills, he argued, provided a critical foundation for the execution of subsequent large-scale development projects (*Angkatan Bersenjata*, [1 May 1976](#)).



Figure 1. Inauguration of the PLTA Batang Agam, 1976
Source: El-Gumanti ([1998](#), p. 62)

The photograph of the inauguration of the Batang Agam Hydroelectric Power Plant in 1976 captures a significant moment in the history of infrastructure development in West Sumatra during the New Order period. The image conveys a formal atmosphere imbued with political and developmental symbolism, marked by the presence of government officials, community leaders associated with *Tungku Tigo Sajarangan*, and military and bureaucratic representatives. Beyond serving as a ceremonial record, the photograph also functions as a visual representation of the success of state-led development programs in expanding access to electricity, while simultaneously reinforcing government legitimacy at the local level through symbols of progress and modernization.

This symbolic dimension of the inauguration was closely intertwined with the broader network of social support that underpinned the project's implementation. Support from informal community leaders played a decisive role in the successful realization of the Batang Agam Hydroelectric Power Plant. These actors were not limited to figures residing in directly affected localities such as Koto Tangah and Batuhampana, but also included influential individuals operating at broader social and political levels. Among them were Buya Datuk Palimo Kayo, a respected Islamic scholar based in Bukittinggi, and former Vice President Mohammad Hatta, who at the time resided in Jakarta. Their moral authority and symbolic endorsement helped strengthen public confidence in the project. They facilitated its acceptance among local communities, thereby complementing the state's formal efforts with culturally resonant forms of legitimacy (Interview with Masni Kamal, 2025).

During the inauguration ceremony of the Batang Agam Hydroelectric Power Plant, Governor Harun Zain publicly challenged the prevailing assumption that development initiatives in West Sumatra were inherently difficult to implement, particularly due to obstacles to land acquisition for government projects. Reporting on the event, *Singgalang* noted that the governor addressed widely circulated claims regarding resistance to development, including assertions that traditional elders (*ninik mamak*) and religious leaders opposed modernization, as well as allegations of widespread community skepticism and obstruction. By highlighting the successful completion of the Batang Agam project, the governor effectively countered these narratives and presented empirical evidence of community cooperation in support of development (*Singgalang*, [1 May 1976](#)).

As an expression of appreciation for local support, PLN provided free electricity to both public and private facilities in the villages of Koto Tangah and Batuhampana. With the power supply activated in these areas, the two villages became the first communities in the region to experience electrification. The delivery of this milestone was subsequently communicated by Yanuar Muin and Masni Kamal to

Mohammad Hatta in Jakarta, underscoring the project's symbolic significance beyond the local level (Interview with Masni Kamal, 2025).

In addition, PLN granted complimentary electricity for two years to two mosques in the vicinity: Al Rahman Mosque in Koto Tengah and the mosque of the Al Manaar Islamic boarding school in Batuhampa. The latter holds historical and religious significance, as it is an ancient mosque located adjacent to the burial complex of Sheik Abdurahman, also known as Sheik Batuhampa, a prominent Islamic scholar who played a key role in the spread of Islam in Lima Puluh Kota. Sheik Abdurahman was also the paternal grandfather of Mohammad Hatta, further reinforcing the symbolic linkage between local religious heritage and national historical figures.

Despite these developments, initial public acceptance of household electrification remained limited. Many residents were hesitant to subscribe to PLN's electricity service because of persistent myths and fears, including concerns about electrocution and fire hazards. This reluctance, however, proved temporary. By the 1980s, as familiarity with electricity increased and its benefits became more apparent, the number of local households connected to the PLN grid rose steadily (Interview with Masni Kamal, 2025).

CONCLUSION

The foregoing analysis confirms that the success of the Batang Agam Hydroelectric Power Plant during the New Order period cannot be reduced to technical expertise or financial capacity alone. Rather, it was fundamentally shaped by the effectiveness of a socio-cultural approach that actively incorporated the informal leadership structure of *Tungku Tigo Sajarangan*. This study demonstrates that *ninik mamak*, *alim ulama*, and *cadiak pandai* functioned as crucial mediators between the state and local society, particularly in navigating sensitive issues such as the acquisition of *ulayat* land. Through dialogical, empathetic, and adaptive strategies, state actors were able not only to mitigate potential conflict but also to foster meaningful community participation at various stages of the project.

Furthermore, the experience of the Batang Agam project challenges the long-standing assumption that the Minangkabau socio-cultural system is inherently incompatible with state-led development initiatives. On the contrary, this case illustrates that when development policies are aligned with local institutional structures and cultural norms, implementation can proceed in a relatively harmonious and sustainable manner. Community engagement extended beyond land relinquishment to include labor contributions, material support, and a sustained sense of collective ownership over the project.

Considering these findings, this article underscores the pivotal role of informal leadership as a form of social capital in regional development processes in West Sumatra. The historical lessons from the Batang Agam Hydroelectric Power Plant remain highly pertinent to contemporary policymaking, particularly by emphasizing the importance of culturally grounded approaches that position local communities as active agents rather than passive recipients of development.

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Author contributions

Israr contributed to the conceptualization, data collection, analysis, manuscript drafting, and revision. Anatona contributed to data analysis, manuscript review, and final editing. All authors have read and approved the final manuscript.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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