

## Strategic communication, media synergies, and trust in rural development: A case study from Albania

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**Abstract:** This study explores how strategic communication can enhance rural development in Albania by examining the interplay between media ecosystems, trust, and innovation. In response to growing distrust in traditional media and fragmented digital engagement, the research investigates how hybrid communication strategies—blending traditional, digital, and interpersonal channels—can better resonate with rural communities. Through semi-structured interviews with communication professionals, local leaders, and development practitioners across Albania, the study applies thematic analysis to uncover stakeholder perceptions and practices. Findings reveal a deep disconnect between institutional messaging and rural realities, largely due to trust deficits and the limited use of interactive, inclusive communication formats. Yet, credible innovations are emerging, such as combining face-to-face outreach with social media or community radio. Trusted local intermediaries—like community leaders and radio hosts—play a pivotal role in bridging this gap. The study introduces a “relational synergy” framework emphasizing the alignment of message, messenger, and media ecology. It concludes that building trust, ensuring cultural relevance, and co-creating content are essential for effective communication in rural areas. Recommendations include investing in digital literacy, leveraging local “trust filters,” and designing participatory, hybrid communication strategies to support inclusive rural transformation.

**Keywords:** Albania, Media hybridity, Rural development, Strategic communication, Trust in media.

### 1. Introduction

Strategic communication plays a pivotal yet often underestimated role in facilitating rural transformation. As rural communities confront multilayered challenges—from agricultural modernization and environmental pressures to depopulation and digital divides—the ability to convey inclusive, credible, and participatory messages becomes increasingly vital. Development communication, once dominated by top-down models, is now being redefined by participatory approaches and the growing influence of diverse media ecosystems. Yet, the question remains: how can strategic communication effectively support rural development in an era of institutional distrust, information overload, and fragmented audiences?

The rapid diffusion of digital technologies has not fully translated into inclusive communication infrastructures in many rural areas. While social media offers new channels for engagement, its potential is undermined by misinformation, uneven access, and low trust in both traditional and new media platforms. Moreover, institutional communication often remains detached from the lived realities of rural populations, resulting in low resonance and limited behavioral change. The disconnect between communication strategies and community dynamics raises concerns about the efficacy of current development narratives.

This study investigates how different communication modalities—particularly the integration of traditional and digital media—can foster more credible and effective rural engagement. It places special emphasis on the role of trust, media synergy, and innovation as key enablers of strategic communication in development contexts. Albania serves as the empirical focus, representing a country where rural communities are grappling with transitions in governance, media landscapes, and public participation.

The research is guided by two primary questions:

1. How do rural stakeholders perceive the trustworthiness and effectiveness of different media platforms in development communication?
2. What forms of media synergy and innovation are emerging as credible and impactful in rural communication efforts?

By exploring these questions through a qualitative lens, the study aims to contribute to both theory and practice in development communication. It underscores the need to move beyond instrumental views of media as mere information delivery tools, toward more nuanced understandings of communication as a relational, trust-building process embedded in cultural and social contexts.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Strategic Communication in Development

Over the last two decades, strategic communication in development has shifted from linear, top-down information transfer toward participatory and adaptive frameworks that prioritize engagement, trust, and behavior change. Servaes [1] reframes communication as an ongoing process that shapes community perceptions, identities, and agency, rather than a one-off tool for disseminating institutional messages. Coffman [2] and Mefalopulos [3] further argue for dialogic practices—such as stakeholder consultation and co-creation of content—that align development goals with the lived experiences of target communities.

However, this participatory ideal often remains unrealized in rural settings. In many post-socialist and transitional societies, entrenched skepticism toward state institutions and centralized messaging undermines the uptake of development initiatives [4]. Top-down narratives routinely marginalize local knowledge and bypass opportunities for genuine feedback, leading to communication strategies that fail to resonate with rural audiences.

### 2.2. Trust, Credibility, and Media Ecosystems

Trust is the bedrock of any effective communication effort: it determines whether messages are received, believed, and acted upon [5]. In rural contexts—where interpersonal ties and social proximity often dictate credibility—messages broadcast via mass media or social platforms can ring hollow if they lack cultural relevance [6]. Recent research documents widespread erosion of trust in both traditional outlets (e.g., radio, print) and digital platforms, driven by misinformation, politicization, and commercial interests [7, 8].

Credibility is thus constructed through consistent, relatable interactions rather than inherent to any medium. Anderson, et al. [9] highlight how platform-driven misinformation exploits weak gatekeeping, while Zheng and Walsham [10] warn that digital solutions alone cannot bridge trust gaps unless they address underlying inequalities in access and digital literacy. In Albania, the Institute for Democracy and Mediation has highlighted the role of local networks and community-based groups—such as Local Action Groups (LAGs) and grassroots organizations—as critical intermediaries of information flows, often outperforming formal institutional channels in certain rural areas [11, 12].

### 2.3. Media Synergies and Hybrid Communication

As rural audiences diversify their media consumption, hybrid models that integrate traditional and digital channels are gaining traction. FAO highlights experiments where community radio converges with internet platforms—enabling two-way interaction between broadcasters and listeners in rural areas. Tacchi [13] and colleagues document participatory radio initiatives linked to mobile platforms

(e.g., WhatsApp groups), showing how such synergies amplify reach and foster feedback loops. Yet, effective synergies require robust coordination, contextual understanding, and flexible infrastructure—capabilities that many development organizations have yet to build. Rogers [14] *Diffusion of Innovations* theory offers a useful lens for understanding how new communication practices spread: interpersonal trust and social endorsement accelerate adoption. Empirical cases—from Malawi farmers using WhatsApp-enabled extension services to African community radio programs that integrate mobile feedback mechanisms—underscore that participatory design is essential to avoid superficial “digital tokenism”. In the Albanian context, recent studies Gjeloshi, et al. [15] and Gjeloshi, et al. [16] confirm that hybrid communication models—particularly the interplay between social media and traditional outlets—have a significant impact on how rural communities perceive development efforts. These studies show that media synergy not only broadens informational reach but also influences trust-building, especially when local actors are involved. Communicative ecology frameworks further suggest that relational synergy—the strategic alignment of message, messenger, and media ecology—can foster more inclusive and effective rural engagement.

### 3. Conceptual Framework

Building on a relational approach to strategic communication, this framework views rural communication ecosystems as multi-level and hybrid spaces in which institutional actors, media intermediaries, and community members co-construct meaning. By foregrounding the dynamic interplay among platforms, trust, and engagement, the model highlights how messages gain—or lose—traction in rural settings.

The proposed framework is structured around four interrelated components that collectively inform how communication strategies can be designed and adapted for rural development contexts. Each component is grounded in relational communication theory and reflects the evolving dynamics of trust, media hybridity, and participatory engagement.

#### 3.1. Strategic Communication: A Relational Synergy Approach

Strategic communication in rural development has evolved from unidirectional messaging toward participatory, context-sensitive processes [1, 3]. However, existing models often overlook the *relational infrastructure* necessary to bridge institutional narratives and community realities. Our relational synergy framework redefines strategic communication by emphasizing three interdependent pillars:

1. Co-constructed Messages: Content is not predetermined but iteratively shaped through community input, ensuring cultural and linguistic resonance (e.g., agricultural advisories redesigned after farmer feedback).
2. Trust-Mediated Messengers: Institutional actors (NGOs, government) must collaborate with *trust filters*—local intermediaries like LAGs or radio hosts—who possess social legitimacy [12].
3. Hybrid Media Ecologies: Effective communication emerges from the dynamic interplay of traditional (radio, print), digital (social media), and interpersonal (face-to-face) channels, each reinforcing the other [16].

*Distinction from Existing Models:* Unlike *communicative ecologies* [13] which map media-platform linkages, or *media convergence* [17] which assumes technological parity, our framework:

- Prioritizes trust-building as the core mechanism for message adoption,
- Accounts for rural asymmetries (e.g., low digital literacy) by leveraging analog-digital synergies, and
- Treats communities as co-designers, not just audiences.

This approach is particularly salient in Albania, where fragmented trust and media hybridity demand strategies that are both adaptive and embedded in local relational networks.

### 3.2. Trust Dynamics

Trust functions as both a prerequisite and an outcome within communication processes. In rural settings, trust is not solely placed in institutions but is often mediated through local "trust filters"—such as agricultural cooperatives, grassroots leaders, and peer-based networks. These actors serve as intermediaries who validate, translate, or challenge institutional messages. In the Albanian context, local development organizations and media research institutes have emphasized the role of community-based structures like Local Action Groups (LAGs) and civil society actors in mediating information and enhancing communication credibility [11, 12]. Conversely, misinformation, political interference, and technocentric interventions that neglect local knowledge can erode trust [9, 10]. Thus, communication strategies must account for the fragility and fluidity of trust, especially in transitional societies.

This component captures the integrative use of multiple communication channels—traditional, digital, and interpersonal—designed to reinforce message coherence. Effective communication in rural areas often emerges from the interplay between hyperlocal tools (e.g., WhatsApp groups or community radio) and broader platforms (e.g., Facebook or televised programs). Research shows that media synergies are most impactful when platforms are not used in isolation but create reciprocal feedback loops that enhance credibility, stimulate dialogue, and support real-time adaptation based on audience reception [13, 16, 18]. In Albania, combining television or radio programming with social media engagement has proven effective in reaching fragmented rural audiences and building participatory dialogue.

### 3.3. Innovation in Communication Practice

Innovation is conceptualized here as the strategic experimentation with message formats, delivery mechanisms, and communicative actors. It involves co-designing communication strategies that respect cultural practices, linguistic diversity, and evolving community dynamics. Examples include integrating mobile messaging with street theater, using trusted local influencers, or experimenting with visual storytelling to increase accessibility. In participatory communication literature, such innovations are not viewed as merely technological but as socio-cultural, grounded in the everyday lived experiences of rural populations [15, 19, 20].

This approach reinforces the idea that genuine innovation emerges when communities actively shape how, what, and through whom messages are communicated.

### 3.4. The Relational Synergy Model

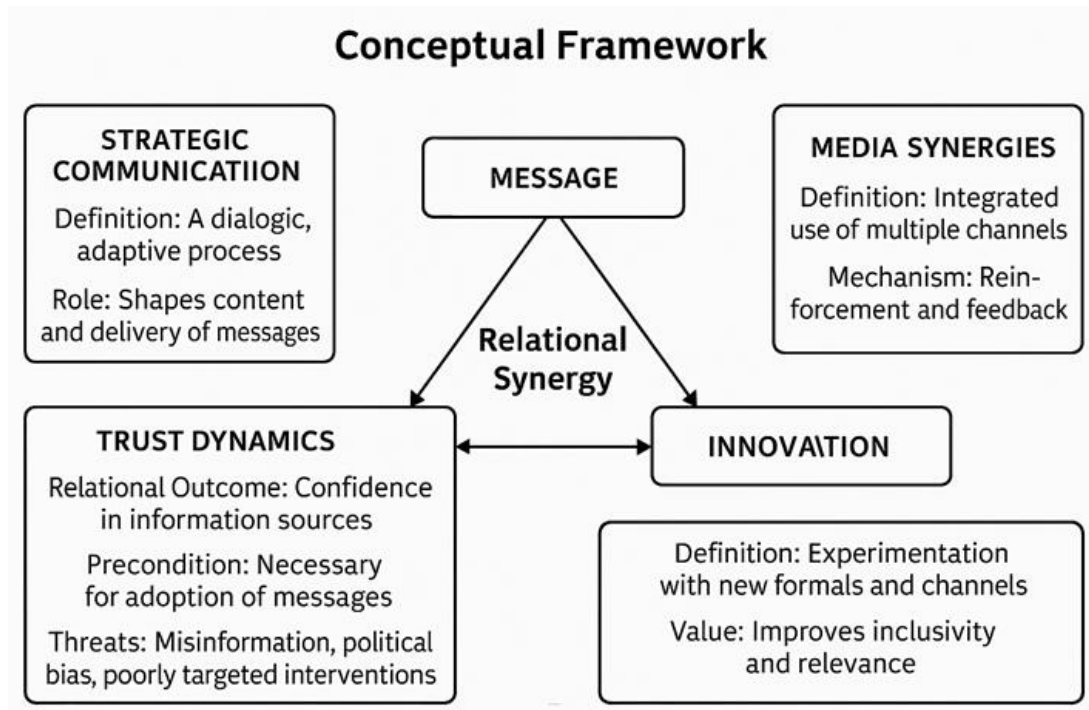
At the core of this framework lies the concept of Relational Synergy—a dynamic alignment between three critical elements:

Message ↔ Messenger ↔ Media Ecology

- Message refers to co-produced content that is locally informed, culturally relevant, and responsive to audience needs. Rather than being predetermined, the message evolves through ongoing community input and feedback, ensuring it resonates with the lived realities of rural populations [1, 3].
- Messenger includes both formal institutional actors (e.g., agricultural extension officers, NGOs) and informal community intermediaries (e.g., local leaders, farmer-to-farmer networks) who possess significant “trust capital” and relational legitimacy [11, 12].
- Media Ecology encompasses the blended ecosystem of communication platforms—analogue, digital, and interpersonal—that shape how information is disseminated, interpreted, and acted upon. This includes traditional media (radio, print), digital platforms (social media, messaging apps), and face-to-face communication channels [13, 16].

The model posits that communicative efficacy in rural contexts is achieved through iterative calibration: each element continuously adapts in response to shifts in the others, guided by audience

feedback and local conditions. This synergy fosters deeper engagement, enhances message credibility, and ultimately strengthens the relational infrastructure upon which successful rural communication depends [14, 19].



**Figure 1.**  
Conceptual framework.

The conceptual framework illustrated in the figure 1 presents a model of Relational Synergy that explains how effective rural communication emerges from the dynamic interplay among five interrelated components: Strategic Communication, Trust Dynamics, Media Synergies, Innovation, and the Message itself.

At the center is the Message, which is not a static piece of information, but a co-constructed output shaped by interactions among the other elements. Surrounding it, Relational Synergy captures the continuous, adaptive alignment between message design, trusted delivery, and contextual media use.

Strategic Communication is defined as a dialogic and adaptive process. It plays a foundational role in shaping both the content and the delivery of messages, ensuring they are responsive to audience needs and rooted in real-world dynamics.

Trust Dynamics refer to the relational outcome of communication—specifically, the degree of confidence that rural audiences place in information sources. Trust is essential for message adoption, yet vulnerable to threats such as misinformation, political bias, and misaligned communication.

Media Synergies involve the integrated use of multiple channels—traditional, digital, and interpersonal. Their value lies in their ability to reinforce messages and generate feedback loops that strengthen understanding and credibility.

Finally, Innovation represents the ongoing experimentation with new formats and channels. It enhances the inclusivity and contextual relevance of communication, especially when informed by local needs and cultural practices.

Together, these components form a cohesive system where trust, adaptability, and participatory practices converge to improve the effectiveness of rural communication strategies.

### 3.5. Link to Research Questions

The conceptual framework outlined above directly informs the formulation and operationalization of the study's research questions. By centering on *relational synergy*—the alignment between message, messenger, and media ecology—this model offers an analytical lens to investigate how trust, hybridity, and co-creation shape communication effectiveness in rural contexts.

RQ1: How do trust dynamics shape rural audiences' perceptions of media platforms?

This question engages the relational link between the Messenger and the Media Ecology components of the framework. It seeks to examine how trust—whether rooted in institutional credibility, interpersonal networks, or localized intermediaries—influences the perceived legitimacy and utility of different communication platforms. The framework suggests that perceptions are not merely platform-dependent but are mediated through layers of relational trust, which determine whether messages are received, believed, and acted upon.

RQ2: What hybrid communication strategies are emerging that exemplify relational synergy in rural settings?

This question explores the Message ↔ Media Ecology dimension, focusing on the convergence of analog and digital tools in co-producing messages that are contextually relevant. It investigates how community participation, iterative feedback, and media blending foster innovative strategies that resonate with rural realities. The emphasis is not just on technological hybridity but on communicative practices that reflect shared meanings, negotiated through both formal and informal channels.

By mapping each research question onto specific relational linkages within the framework, this study provides an actionable structure for empirically investigating the interplay between trust, media practice, and community engagement. It supports the development of rural communication strategies that are not only inclusive and adaptive, but also grounded in the lived realities of rural stakeholders.

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1. Research Design

This study employs an exploratory qualitative design grounded in an interpretivist epistemology, prioritizing the lived experiences of rural communication stakeholders in Albania. Aligned with our relational synergy framework, we adopt Grunig and Hunt [21] *Symmetrical Model* as an operational lens to examine how *message-messenger-media ecology alignment* fosters participatory communication.

### 4.2. Symmetrical Model in Relational Context

The Symmetrical Model's emphasis on two-way dialogue complements our framework's core tenets:

1. Message Adaptation: Institutional messages are iteratively refined through community feedback loops (e.g., social media polls informing radio content).
2. Trusted Messengers: Local intermediaries (e.g., LAG leaders) bridge institutional-community divides, embodying the model's "mutual understanding" principle.
3. Platform Synergy: Hybrid channels (e.g., WhatsApp groups amplifying radio broadcasts) operationalize the model's call for multi-directional engagement.

Table 1 below contrasts traditional one-way communication models with the symmetrical or relational synergy approach proposed in this study. In conventional models, the primary goal is the dissemination of information, with rural communities treated as passive recipients of pre-formulated messages. Communication tools in this model are typically static and unidirectional, such as print media or broadcast announcements, offering limited space for feedback or engagement.

By contrast, the relational synergy approach emphasizes the co-creation of trusted, actionable knowledge. Here, rural communities are not merely consumers of information but active participants in the design and refinement of messages. This participatory role enhances the relevance and resonance of communication strategies. Rather than relying on isolated or fixed tools, the relational model leverages dynamic and hybrid media ecosystems, combining traditional channels like radio with interactive digital



platforms and face-to-face interactions. These integrated tools foster continuous dialogue, feedback, and trust-building—key elements for effective and inclusive rural development communication.

**Table 1.**

Contrast with Traditional Approaches.

Aspect	One-Way Model	Symmetrical/Relational Synergy Approach
Goal	Information dissemination	Co-creation of trusted, actionable knowledge
Community Role	Passive recipients	Active participants in message design
Tools	Static broadcasts	Dynamic, hybrid media ecosystems

#### 4.3. Methodological Alignment

- Data Collection: 70 semi-structured interviews ensured thematic saturation [22] with participants purposively sampled across roles (NGOs, local leaders, journalists) and regions (Northern, Central, Southern Albania).
- Triangulation: Policy document analysis (e.g., IPARD III) validated interview findings, mitigating institutional affiliation biases.
- Ethics: Informed consent and anonymization protocols were strictly followed.

This design captures the *relational* and *adaptive* nature of rural communication, answering RQ1 (trust dynamics) and RQ2 (hybrid strategies) through a synergy-focused lens.

#### 4.4. Data Collection

Data were collected through seventy semi-structured interviews conducted from October 2024 to May 2025. Participants were purposively selected based on their active involvement in rural communication initiatives across Albania. The sample included public-sector communication officers, NGO practitioners, journalists, media producers, local leaders, and grassroots activists.

Interview guides, informed by the conceptual framework and relevant literature, addressed themes such as trust-building mechanisms, audience segmentation, and multi-channel media usage. These guides were piloted with two practitioners to ensure clarity and cultural relevance. All interviews were conducted in Albanian, recorded with informed consent, and transcribed verbatim.

Purposive sampling ensured inclusion of individuals with direct experience in designing, implementing, or evaluating rural communication campaigns. Participants represented diverse regions and institutions, including both governmental and non-governmental actors.

#### 4.5. Data Analysis

Transcripts were analyzed using Braun and Clarke [22] six-phase thematic analysis: familiarization, coding, theme development, theme review, definition and naming, and reporting. To enhance trustworthiness, researcher triangulation and member checking were employed.

Additionally, national and regional policy documents were systematically analyzed and benchmarked against EU standards through the IPARD III programme [23] and regional progress metrics from the SWG Report [24]. Documents analyzed included Albania's National Agricultural Strategy [25] Kosovo's National Rural Development Program [26], Montenegro's Agriculture and Rural Development Strategy [27] North Macedonia's Digital Agriculture Initiative [28] and Serbia's digital extension programs [29].

## 5. Findings and Discussion

This study explored strategic communication dynamics in rural Albania through the lens of a relational synergy framework, examining how message, messenger, and media ecology interact within trust-driven, hybrid communication ecosystems. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with communication experts, journalists, government officials, NGO practitioners, and local leaders from

four rural regions, four interconnected themes emerged, illuminating key challenges and opportunities in rural communication.

### 5.1. Strategic Communication Channels and Trust Dynamics

Traditional media channels—particularly television, radio, and face-to-face meetings—remain the most trusted and widely utilized means of communication in rural communities. One participant summarized:

*“The main communication channels are television and face-to-face meetings.”*

While digital platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp have penetrated these areas, their use is largely informal, one-way, and promotional rather than dialogic. A respondent noted: *“Younger community members often act as digital intermediaries, relaying online content to older relatives, but structured digital outreach from institutions is virtually nonexistent.”*

Trust deficits toward institutional communicators are pronounced: *“There is a total lack of trust in those who communicate.”*

This mistrust aligns with broader patterns of misinformation and political interference documented in the literature [9, 10]. Conversely, local intermediaries—such as community radio hosts and grassroots leaders—serve as vital “trust filters,” mediating and validating messages within their social networks [11, 12].

### 5.2. Nature of Information and Core Communication Challenges

Participants emphasized that institutional communication prioritizes political achievements and formal announcements, while practical agricultural advice and policy updates are often missing or too technical to be useful. A journalist observed:

*“Agricultural advice, development programs, or policy changes are missing... what is shared are mostly institutional achievements.”*

Another participant added:

*“People receive information only from what they hear on TV or see on social media.”*

Key communication challenges identified include:

- Trust Deficits: *“There is a total lack of trust in those responsible for communication.”*
- Information Gaps: *“No clear strategy or action plan exists to effectively reach rural populations.”*
- Misinformation Spread: *“Social media are mainly used for propaganda, not for listening or addressing community concerns.”*
- Demographic Barriers: *“Emigration occurs because institutions have neglected rural areas.”*
- Passive Leadership: *“Communities are pressured to accept messages they do not believe.”*

These issues reflect the fragility of trust and the critical need for culturally grounded, context-sensitive communication practices [1, 3].

### 5.3. Media Ecology and Innovation in Communication Practice

Digital tools such as WhatsApp and Facebook hold untapped potential but remain underutilized within strategic communication efforts. Participants reported low digital literacy as a major barrier: *“Digital literacy is generally low... the administration does not provide support but simply refers people to offices that offer no real help.”*

No structured national or local initiatives address digital inclusion in rural areas: *“There is no program or initiative addressing this need.”*

Small-scale innovations—such as women-led digital literacy workshops and community “info ambassador” programs—show promise by empowering local intermediaries and creating new trust nodes. However, these efforts remain underfunded and lack institutional backing. This finding aligns with Tacchi and Pavarala [19] view of innovation as socio-cultural and participatory, rather than merely technological.



#### 5.4. Roles, Collaboration, and Recommendations for Participatory Engagement

NGOs play a minimal role in rural communication. One participant noted: “NGOs are practically nonexistent in rural areas.”

Local leaders can serve as trusted intermediaries, but their involvement is often inconsistent and passive:

“They serve as intermediaries, and this relationship strengthens trust between the community and institutions.”

Participants recommended strategies to enhance rural communication effectiveness, including:

- Increasing face-to-face outreach through public forums and local meetings.
- Developing moderated digital platforms using clear, accessible language to foster dialogue.
- Strengthening transparency and promoting co-creation in institutional messaging.
- Investing in digital education programs targeting underserved groups, especially women and older adults.
- Treating rural communities as active partners rather than passive recipients: “Communication must be transparent and truthful to achieve its purpose.”

#### 5.5. Integration with the Conceptual Framework and Regional Context

These findings resonate strongly with the relational synergy model articulated in the conceptual framework, emphasizing the dynamic alignment between message, messenger, and media ecology [13, 14, 16]. The identified challenges of trust deficits, information gaps, and low digital literacy underscore the fragility of rural communication ecosystems in transitional contexts such as Albania.

Importantly, the regional context of the Western Balkans offers instructive examples that complement and reinforce these insights. National strategies and initiatives across the region demonstrate varied approaches to addressing rural communication and development challenges through integrated, hybrid models combining traditional outreach with digital innovation. For instance, Albania’s *National Agricultural Strategy 2021–2027* [25] highlights efforts to modernize agricultural advisory services and improve public awareness campaigns. Similarly, Kosovo’s *National Rural Development Program 2022–2028* [26] and Montenegro’s *Agriculture and Rural Development Strategy 2023–2028* [27] emphasize community engagement through multimedia outreach and digital extension services.

North Macedonia’s *Digital Agriculture Initiative* [28] and Serbia’s *Digital Extension Programs* [29] provide examples of leveraging e-agriculture platforms and targeted digital tools to enhance information flow between governments, researchers, and rural stakeholders.

These regional cases illustrate the potential of hybrid communication ecosystems, which align well with the relational synergy framework by integrating participatory engagement, trust-building intermediaries, and multi-platform message dissemination. They also highlight the need for sustained investment in digital literacy and inclusive infrastructure to overcome barriers such as demographic shifts and infrastructural deficits that persist in rural Albania and beyond.

## 6. Conclusion and Implications

This study examined how rural stakeholders in Albania perceive the trustworthiness and effectiveness of various media platforms (RQ1) and explored innovative hybrid communication strategies that enhance credible and participatory engagement (RQ2). Drawing on qualitative interviews from four rural regions, the findings confirm that traditional media—especially radio, television, and face-to-face meetings—remain the primary channels of communication. However, their largely one-way nature and declining institutional credibility have opened space for local intermediaries such as community radio hosts, cooperatives, and grassroots leaders to act as essential “trust filters” within rural networks.

Digital platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook are increasingly present but remain underutilized for strategic communication. Low digital literacy, lack of structured support, and the absence of co-

designed, participatory digital initiatives limit these tools from evolving into effective two-way communication channels.

**Theoretical Contributions:** This research advances a relational synergy framework that reconceptualizes strategic communication as the iterative alignment of message, messenger, and media ecology. Moving beyond isolated channel analysis, the framework highlights the co-production of meaning through community-informed messages, trusted local intermediaries, and integrated traditional-digital platforms. This approach extends diffusion of innovations theory by emphasizing digital media's role not only in introducing innovations but in reinforcing trust and engagement within a hybrid ecosystem.

**Practical Implications:** Based on the findings, the following strategies are recommended for policymakers and practitioners aiming to strengthen rural communication and development:

1. **Leverage Trust Filters:** Establish and formalize partnerships with trusted local actors—such as cooperatives and community leaders—to enhance message credibility and outreach effectiveness.
2. **Co-Design Hybrid Communication Campaigns:** Develop integrated approaches combining face-to-face engagement, community radio, and moderated social media platforms to foster ongoing dialogue and feedback loops.
3. **Invest in Inclusive Digital Capacity Building:** Expand digital literacy programs focusing on women, older adults, and low-income households, alongside efforts to improve rural internet infrastructure and accessibility.
4. **Institutionalize Two-Way Feedback Mechanisms:** Create moderated forums and advisory councils enabling rural populations to voice concerns, verify information, and participate actively in communication processes.

By embracing these approaches, development actors can transition from top-down information delivery to relational communication that builds trust, fosters local ownership, and supports sustainable behavioral change. Ultimately, this lays the foundation for a more resilient, informed, and engaged rural Albania, where media ecosystems serve as vital connectors rather than sources of fragmentation.

## Transparency:

The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

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