

## MATERIAL INCENTIVES AND CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT IN PHILIPPINE LOCAL GOVERNANCE

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### ABSTRACT

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This study examines how barangay officials in the Philippines use ayuda, or material assistance, as a strategy to encourage citizen engagement in local governance. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, individual interviews were conducted with 28 barangay officials across Bukidnon province. Thematic analysis revealed three findings: (1) ayuda is an effective short-term motivator for participation, particularly in economically vulnerable communities, (2) officials are concerned about dependency and transactional forms of engagement, and (3) strategies such as attendance-based distribution, raffles, and food provision are commonly employed to sustain turnout. While these approaches increase citizen presence, they do not guarantee long-term and meaningful participation. This is one of the first studies to explore the perspectives of barangay officials, the implementers of ayuda, highlighting how they operationalize aid as a governance tool. The findings raise critical questions about sustainability and ethics in incentive-driven participation and recommend integrating civic education and participatory mechanisms beyond material rewards. These insights can inform policy design that balances immediate social protection with inclusive and empowered local governance.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Citizen engagement is a foundational element of democratic governance, especially in local contexts where public participation directly influences service delivery, accountability, and trust in institutions. In the Philippines, barangay is the smallest administrative and political unit that are at the forefront of local governance and are tasked with facilitating participatory mechanisms as mandated by the 1987 Constitution and the Local Government Code of 1991 (Republic Act No. 7160, 1991). Barangay assemblies, consultations, and development planning are among the platforms meant to encourage community involvement and collective action (Turok & Scheba, 2020; Florida et al., 2023).

In practice, however, citizen participation in barangay activities remains uneven, especially in economically disadvantaged communities (Arrabaca & Base, 2020). Over the past few years, the distribution of government financial assistance, commonly referred to as ayuda, has become central not only to social protection efforts but also to the mobilization of grassroots engagement. Ayuda programs were scaled up significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic, including the Social Amelioration Program (SAP), Ayuda sa Kapos ang Kita Program (AKAP), and Assistance to Individuals in Crisis Situations (AICS), among others (Montaño, 2022; Punongbayan & Suzara, 2025). These programs provided lifelines for millions of Filipinos but also reshaped the dynamics of local governance.

Several studies have documented the varying impacts of these programs. Ayuda addressed immediate needs and temporarily reduced economic vulnerability (Diaz et al., 2024; Matolo et al., 2022). In remote island communities, it contributed to household food security and well-being during lockdowns (Pavo, Badayos-Jover, & Bagsit, 2024). Yet concerns remain about aid delivery, consistency, and transparency. Issues such as favoritism, uneven distribution, and dependency were raised both by community members and observers of policy implementation (Gozum & Aguas, 2022; Bueno, 2025; Palatino, 2025). These challenges are compounded by the political nature of aid, particularly in the context of elections and discretionary budget increases, which suggest that ayuda may be used to secure political loyalty rather than foster genuine civic engagement (Punongbayan & Suzara, 2025).

The use of incentives to encourage participation is rooted in well-established motivational theories. Material rewards can increase participation where economic need is high (Sharp et al., 2006), and this has been seen in Philippine barangays where aid distribution is tied to community attendance or support for initiatives (Eadie & Yacub, 2023; Rosvold, 2019). However, when citizens begin to associate participation primarily with material benefits, the result may be a transactional form of engagement that weakens democratic norms and diminishes intrinsic motivations. Studies in both rural and urban settings suggest that sustained engagement may decline once material incentives are removed (Baillon et al., 2019; Diaz et al., 2024).

While ayuda is an important influence on citizen behaviors, scholars have devoted more discussions to the experiences of aid recipients (Tagacay et al. 2013; Diaz et al. 2013; Pavo et al. 2014), with less attention given to the implementers. It is still a gap in the literature concerning how local officials or barangay officials, the frontline actors of local governance, understand and utilize ayuda as a mechanism for encouraging citizen involvement. Their perspectives are vital to understand how incentives are negotiated, implemented, and sustained, and whether these practices promote genuine civic or political engagement or reinforce dependency.

This study attempts to fill that gap by examining the role of ayuda in citizen engagement based on the perspectives of barangay officials. Their experiences and stories provide valuable insight into the operational, ethical, and strategic dimensions of using ayuda to influence participation. Understanding how local leaders balance short-term needs with long-term goals of empowerment can inform broader policy and program design. The findings have relevance not only for the improvement of aid distribution systems but also for advancing participatory governance practices that are inclusive, sustainable, and responsive to local contexts.

## 2. METHODS

This inquiry followed the descriptive qualitative research design in examining how incentives in the form of ayuda influence the grassroots citizen engagement as perceived by barangay officials. Given the growing use of social assistance as a governance tool in the Philippines, the research sought to provide a grounded understanding of how local leaders operationalize, negotiate, and perceive the effectiveness and challenges of material incentives in promoting participation.

### Participants

The study involved 28 barangay officials from various municipalities and cities in the province of Bukidnon, Philippines. These included nine barangay captains, fifteen kagawads (councilors), three secretaries, and one treasurer. Participants were recruited based on their active involvement in aid distribution and community mobilization. Years of experience varied from one to over 10 years, offering both seasoned and relatively new perspectives. Purposeful sampling was used to ensure the inclusion of diverse roles within barangay governance structures, which are critical in the design and implementation of citizen engagement strategies linked to ayuda.

Table 1. Distribution of Key Informants

Key Informants	Frequency
Barangay Captain	9
Barangay Kagawad (Councilor)	15
Barangay Secretary	3
Barangay Treasurer	1
Total	28

Table 2. Years in Service of Key Informants

Years in Service of Key Informants	Frequency
1-5 years	12

6-10 years	8
More than 10 years	8
Total	28

### Data Collection

Individual, semi-structured interviews were conducted in a conversational format to allow participants to express their experiences and perspectives freely. Interviews were conducted in the local language and transcribed with participants' consent, ensuring confidentiality and ethical compliance. Participants were briefed on the purpose of the study and voluntarily agreed to participate. This data collection method was chosen to elicit rich, narrative accounts that could capture both operational realities and value-laden reflections on the use of material incentives in governance.

### Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach. This involved familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Coding was done manually to identify patterns related to how ayuda was utilized, its effects on citizen behavior, and the perceived sustainability of such practices. Themes were validated by comparing patterns across different barangays and roles. Direct quotations were used to reflect authentic insights and maintain participant voice throughout the analysis.

## 3. RESULTS

The thematic analysis of the interviews with barangay officials yielded three major themes that describe how incentive-based participation is implemented and perceived in barangay governance: (1) Ayuda as a Strategy to Encourage Participation, (2) Concerns over Dependency and Selective Participation, and (3) Strategies for Managing Distribution and Participation.

### Ayuda as a Catalyst for Participation

Most barangay officials acknowledged the role of ayuda in increasing citizen turnout during community activities such as barangay assemblies, clean-up drives, and information campaigns. The promise of receiving food packs, grocery items, or small cash amounts was cited as an effective motivator, especially among low-income households. Several officials noted that attendance rates significantly increased when ayuda was associated with participation, even in non-emergency situations. A barangay councilor shared:

*"Kasagara ug naa silay makuha nga mga hinabang, pag nay hinabang 5 kilos rice puno na ang covered court. Pero ug wala silay makuha like for example ang mag render og services like pahina halos wala na dia na notice na ninyu." (Usually, when there is aid distribution, like 5 kilograms of rice, the covered court is full. But when there's nothing to receive, such as when rendering services like 'pahina' [community clean-up], hardly*

anyone shows up.) (Participant 1, Barangay Councilor)

This sentiment underscores the strong link between *ayuda* and citizen participation turnout, particularly in economically constrained communities. The immediate benefits of *ayuda* not only address pressing economic needs but also serve as a motivator for citizens to engage in barangay activities. Barangay officials recognized *ayuda* as a powerful tool to engage constituents, especially those in poverty-stricken areas, where basic needs take precedence over voluntary civic duties.

### **Concerns over Dependency and Selective Participation**

While acknowledging its effectiveness, many respondents expressed concern about the sustainability of using *ayuda* as a mobilization tool. Several barangay officials observed that some residents only participated when they were assured of immediate material benefits. A recurring sentiment was that participation had become conditional, leading to what one official referred to as "attendance with expectations." A barangay captain observed:

*"Ang mga residente dili interesado mo-apil sa mga buluhaton kung walay kwarta nga ma-involve; gamay ra kaayo ang mo-attend, pero kung financial assistance, daghan mo-apil." (Residents are not interested in joining activities without financial involvement; very few attend, but if there's financial assistance, many participate.) (Participant 12, Barangay Captain)*

This dependency presents a significant challenge to fostering sustainable engagement and developing intrinsic motivations for civic involvement. Furthermore, the expectation for material rewards discourages voluntary participation. One kagawad noted:

*"When we call a meeting, ang mga tao dili mo adto ug walay kaon. Mo uli. Pag-tan-aw gani nila naay pani-udto ayha na dayun mo uli after kaon." (When we call a meeting, people don't attend if there's no food. They leave. But if they see that lunch is provided, they stay, only to leave right after eating.) (Participant 25, Barangay Captain)*

These findings highlight how dependency on material incentives not only limits intrinsic motivation but also perpetuates a mindset focused on short-term rewards.

### **Strategies for Managing Distribution and Participation**

Barangay officials have developed strategies to manage *ayuda* distribution and incentivize participation effectively. These include attendance tracking during assemblies, organizing raffles and giveaways, and distributing snacks or meals. A barangay secretary shared:

*"Ang among strategies nga gihimo is naa jud me attendance kada naa mi buhaton nga assembly ug meetings kay pinaagi ana diha me mag basi kung*

*kinsa tong angayan hatagan ug pahalipay." (Our strategy is to take attendance during assemblies and meetings, and based on that, we determine who deserves rewards.) (Participant 5, Barangay Secretary).*

Officials also pooled resources to sustain distribution initiatives despite financial constraints. For example, one kagawad explained:

*"Naninkamot si barangay council na maka hatag ug bugas...so among pag-amot-amot sa barangay council, naka abot mig para bugas... para ma encourage silag bisita sa barangay mo apil anang barangay assembly." (The barangay council strives to provide rice. By pooling our resources, we manage to give rice—not in large quantities, but enough to encourage them to visit the barangay and participate in assemblies.) (Participant 11, Barangay Councilor)*

Participant 5 highlighted the use of raffles, giveaways, or snacks as effective strategies to attract participation, stating:

*"Naa mi pa raffle ug giveaways or snacks nga para sa tanan ug pinaagi ana maka kuha namo ang participation sa kadaghanan" (We have raffles, giveaways, or snacks for everyone, and through that, we can get participation from many people.) (Participant 5, Barangay Secretary).*

While these strategies effectively increase turnout, they reveal a persistent reliance on material incentives. Officials acknowledged the need to move beyond transactional approaches by incorporating activities that foster community-driven participation and intrinsic motivation.

## **4. DISCUSSION**

The results of this study reinforce the growing body of literature emphasizing the complex interplay between government-provided incentives and grassroots citizen engagement in the Philippine context. While the practice of giving *ayuda* has often been seen as a temporary relief mechanism, it has also become a tool for strengthening participation in governance, though not without significant concerns regarding sustainability, dependency, and inclusivity.

First, the finding that some barangay officials perceive *ayuda* as a facilitator of citizen engagement aligns with previous studies that highlight the motivational potential of direct material incentives in encouraging community participation. Diaz et al. (2023) found it promising that the Social Amelioration Program (SAP) alleviated short-term financial difficulties, the program also highlighted inefficiencies and issues on the promptness and inclusivity of rollout. In the same vein, the report of Punongbayan and Suzara (2025) noted how *ayuda* programs had thrived during the pandemic and in the lead-up to the 2025 elections, but the question of their sustainability and long-term economic impact remained.

These observations reflect the tension between immediate relief and longer-term participatory development. As Delina et al. (2025) contended that while aid performs a crucial part in reacting to catastrophes, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected regions, it frequently fails to blossom into a stage for capacity development and resilience. In the context of this study, some barangay leaders acknowledged that while incentive-based engagement increased turnout and responsiveness during relief distributions, it did not always translate into sustained citizen participation in governance-related activities such as consultations or community planning.

The findings also underscore that some officials view ayuda as part of a transactional political culture that employs aid not only as assistance, but also as leverage. Gozum and Aguas (2023) considered the application of Rawlsian justice to ayuda in the time of pandemic, and pointed to the ethical dilemma when social welfare is used selectively or as a commodity to be traded for politics. Meanwhile, Palatino (2025) a version of “ayuda politics” emerged from the rise of local elites have used the cash transfers to gain political capital.

Also, the subjective well-being that citizens derived from it, when they received ayuda (discussed by Pavo, Badayos-Jover, & Bagsit, 2024) was congruent with the present result that fairness of distribution contributed to building trust to local officials. Their work in Northern Iloilo emphasized that rice as well as cash were considered survival goods as well as symbols of acknowledgment and incorporation by the state.

Nevertheless, some respondents in this study also voiced concerns about relational reliance between repeat ayuda cycles. This is in line with Delina et al. (2025) and by Diaz et al. (2023), the latter two suggested how dependence on unconditional transfer may reduce local initiative and motivation for governance development. Furthermore, the Ranis et al. (2022) highlighted the need to design mechanisms for the delivery of ayuda that better suit the needs of marginalized groups, thereby preventing the most vulnerable from being excluded.

Finally, the report of Delina et al (2025) emphasise the potential of community-based participatory approaches to assist. Such views compel us to reconceptualize incentive-driven mechanisms such as ayuda not simply raising the specter of emergency relief, but as gateways for inclusive governance and empowerment. The findings reported in this paper represent this double potential: while ayuda catalyzed action in selected barangays, it also brought significant reflection on the nature and implications of such action if it is to be meaningful, strategic, and catalytic in the long run.

In sum, this research adds to a knowledge of ayuda as something other than welfare. It reveals the nuanced intersection of incentive-based participation with citizen engagement, which is influenced by political, cultural, and institutional contexts. More work is needed to examine these dynamics in other contexts and understand how government policies may transition from ‘stopgap’ relief to collaborative governance approaches.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This research examined how barangay officials view and practice incentive-based participation, in particular, the release of ayuda, within the broader domain of Philippine

local governance. The results showed that while ayuda may be a useful strategy for increasing participation and engagement in community activities, it is not without its ethical and practical challenges. For many barangay officials, distributing aid was not just a social welfare measure but also a governance tactic to promote visibility, participation and community backing. But the results also suggest the increasing likelihood of dependence and the normalization of transactional participation, in which civic engagement is motivated more by the hope of material reward than any sense of civic responsibility. It is caused by worries about the sustainability and the authenticity of grassroots participation, in particular in the poorest and most-exploited communities.

Barangay officials expressed both practicality and hesitation in managing the use of incentives. While acknowledging their effectiveness to mobilize people, they also saw that there may be far-reaching consequences for democratic governance such as the undermining of internal motivation and the political nature of aid. Their reflections add to the urgency to revisit current approaches to citizen engagement and to think about how aid programs might be reprogrammed to enable comprehensive, meaningful, and resilient participation.

In light of these findings, the study highlights the importance of strengthening and improving local participatory governance mechanisms that go beyond material incentives and ayuda. This involves investing in civic education, ensuring fair and transparent aid delivery systems, and building community capacities for co-governance. Future policies must strike a balance between addressing immediate needs through ayuda and cultivating long-term civic responsibility, especially in the barangay level where trust and relationships are deeply embedded in everyday governance.

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