

STRENGTHENING THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS: ASSESSING THEIR INVOLVEMENT IN THE DECISION-MAKING OF A SOUTHERN PHILIPPINE DISTRICT.

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ABSTRACT

Received: 30-04-2024

Accepted: 39-06-2024

Keywords:

Civil Society Organization, Decision – Process, Participation, Community Engagement, Development Planning, Monitoring, and Evaluation

This article investigates the role of civil society organizations (CSOs) in the decision-making process in a district in the southern Philippines. The study used a descriptive analysis to assess CSO involvement in policy formulation, local development planning, program implementation, and monitoring and evaluation. The findings reveal that while there is limited engagement of CSOs in policy formulation, they make significant contributions to development planning, ensuring consensus-based decision-making that caters to diverse community sectors. CSOs also actively participate in program implementation and monitoring progress. However, the study admits some limitations, including a small sample size and potential redundancy of information due to statement correlation. Nonetheless, the study emphasizes the potential of CSOs to enrich the decision-making process within districts. To enhance CSO involvement, district officials should forge stronger partnerships with NGOs and private sectors, and CSOs should innovate solutions for emerging challenges. Future research should address identified limitations and involve district officials to gain a comprehensive understanding of decision-making processes.

1. INTRODUCTION

The district serves as the main unit for planning and implementing government programs, projects, and services, and also provides an opportunity for the community to express their collective opinions and ideas. (B.P. 337, n.d.). In the Philippines, districts come behind provinces and independent cities in terms of political hierarchy (Orzech, 2023). Districts, the fundamental units of every province and autonomous city in the Philippines are composed of municipalities, sometimes known as component cities. The first level of governance that the general people can deal with in this country is the little over 42,000 districts (Orzech, 2023). Politics is essentially concerned with establishing and maintaining the basic structure of society through the formation of groups. These groups constitute the fundamental building blocks of society and provide the necessary foundation for political activities. (Studocu, n.d.). In a district in the southern Philippines, the local community was not aware of the involvement of civil society organizations in the area. Their role in decision-making is not that appreciated. This research is focused on evaluating how much civil society organizations are involved in the process of decision-making in a district located in the southern region of the Philippines.

When civil society organizations are involved in government processes, it provides opportunities for citizens to express their needs and actively participate in decision-making processes at the local government unit level. This is

a way of empowering citizens and encouraging more participatory and responsive governance. Hence, the active participation of CSOs is crucial for achieving this goal. (MC No. 2021-054, 2021). Civil society encompasses a broad range of organizations, including professional associations, foundations, indigenous groups, labor unions, community organizations, NGOs, and faith-based and philanthropic organizations (*Who and What Is "Civil Society?"* 2021). A "civil society" organization refers to a group of individuals who work towards the collective good of the society through democratic means. They act as intermediaries between the government and the people. Such organizations are not affiliated with or under the control of the state and are involved in social activities. (*Civil Society Organization - EUR-Lex*, n.d.).

Civil Society also contributed strategies and shared suggestions to foster participatory governance. According to "Civil Society Organizations and Good Governance" (n.d.-b), good governance is essential for promoting public participation in policymaking and ensuring inclusive decision-making processes. The World Bank Group (2014) also emphasizes that a well-governed society should facilitate opportunities for every individual to realize their full potential. To promote the general welfare of the people, it is important to implement good governance practices at the grassroots level, such as in the barangay. Therefore, this study is critical for informing policy interventions that can enhance the engagement of civil society organizations in the

decision-making process of a district in the southern Philippines.

In Mindanao Island of the Philippine archipelago, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and Government Organizations (GOs) emerged to aid in the repatriation and rehabilitation of communities that were adversely affected by recent wars. Additionally, several cause-oriented groups established their organizations to support the government in providing basic human services more effectively and efficiently through decentralization and empowerment. This demonstrates that civil society organizations play a significant role in promoting democratization in the country. This viewpoint is also supported by De Guzman and Reforma (1998), who asserted that decentralization is a strategy for achieving sustainable development and democratizing the political system, making it a critical issue in the field of public administration. According to Ngumbela (2023b), the role of civil society organizations (CSOs) is crucial in society. Bodin (1963, p. 80) argues that the ethical potential of civil society enables it to resist hegemonies and official state policy aggression by relying on its independent political ethics, morals, and political ecology. He further contends that the spirit of civil society is derived from the active potential of individuals and their associations, as well as their willingness to participate in politics, their independence, their commitment to the common good, and their acceptance of political responsibility for a better future.

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) cited in its governance brief several good governance outcomes that have been documented when civil society organizations (CSOs) worked with the government for good governance. It mentioned higher governmental or institutional responsiveness, less corruption, better budget use, and improved public service delivery. The ADB also highlighted evidence that CSO participation increases access, responsiveness, inclusivity, and accountability in public-sector delivery of services such as health, water, education, and agriculture. CSO participation also increases openness, accountability, and sustainability in natural resource management (Lu, 2023).

The objective of this study is twofold: a) to assess the degree of involvement of civil society organizations in the decision-making process of a district located in the southern Philippines, specifically in the areas of policy and ordinance formulation, local development planning, program implementation, monitoring and evaluation, and consultation and legislation, and b) to guide the district in prioritizing civil society participation in decision-making processes. Jinia et al. (2021) assert that empowering civil society organizations can have a significant impact on the development of effective and inclusive policies within the locality.

Objective of the Study

The focus of this study is to investigate the level of involvement of civil society organizations in the decision-making process of a district located in the southern part of the Philippines. The study aims to address the following research questions:

1. The extent of participation of Civil Society Organizations in terms of:

- 1.1 Formulating Policies and Ordinances in the Community
- 1.2 Local Development Planning
- 1.3 Implementation of Programs
- 1.4 Monitoring and Evaluation

Literature Review

Civil Society Dynamics

According to Ishida (2022), civil society comprises various non-governmental organizations, community groups, advocacy organizations, and other entities that function independently from the government and private sector. These groups play a critical role in shaping public opinion, driving social and political change, and addressing diverse issues such as environmental conservation, social justice, and human rights. The contacts, connections, and actions of various groups as they interact with the government, with one another, and with the general public are what make up the dynamics of civil society. This may involve modifications to the tactics and approaches these groups use, as well as shifts in the level of support and involvement from the general public (Rosenblum & Post, 2013). Comprehending the dynamics of civil society is crucial to grasp the intricate interactions among many actors within a society and their role in molding its social, political, and cultural terrain. It entails assessing how civic involvement is changing, how coalitions and alliances are formed, how outside forces affect civil society, and how successful civil society is at bringing about constructive social change in general (Klein & Lee, 2019).

The impact of civil society organizations on district administration

The Philippine Constitution of 1986 recognized the involvement of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in governance, with a focus on promoting and safeguarding public participation in social, political, and economic decision-making (Civil Society Organizations and Good Governance, n.d.). The Local Government Code of 1991 further solidified this by allowing for CSO participation in governance at the local level (Lu, 2023). By decentralizing governance in the country, as mandated by the Local Government Code, the aim is to enhance the role of local governments in national development and improve overall governance by bringing the government closer to the people. The participation of CSOs in local governance is deemed both a means and end to decentralization (Open Government Partnership, 2017). Civil society organizations are important vehicles through which citizens can participate in the policy-making process thus promoting accountability, participation, transparency, and eventually good governance (Mavee & Cloete, 2012).

Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) have been instrumental in complementing the government's efforts to uplift, empower, and protect the vulnerable, disadvantaged, and marginalized sectors of Philippine society. The 1987 Constitution of the Republic of the Philippines institutionalized this trust through Article II, Section 23,

which encourages non-government organizations, community, and sectoral organizations that promote the welfare of the nation. However, the extent of civil society's participation and engagement in the government sector remains partly understood (Pasha, 2004). In certain cases, civil society organizations collaborate closely with government agencies on joint initiatives or projects, either throughout the entire project or at specific stages such as planning, implementation, or evaluation (Hendricks, 2023). Additionally, the role of Civil Society Organizations/NGOs in delivering basic services and pursuing development has become increasingly recognized in recent years, as noted by Brillantes Jr. (1992). Local Government Units are also encouraged to promote the establishment and operation of people's and non-government organizations as active partners in pursuing local autonomy, as stated in Section 34 of the Local Government Code of 1991.

The involvement of the community in decision-making processes

Community engagement refers to a collaborative effort that involves working with groups of individuals who are connected by shared interests, geographic proximity, or similar circumstances to address issues that affect their well-being. This approach is a powerful tool for promoting environmental and behavioral changes that improve the overall health of both the community and its members. The process typically involves building partnerships and coalitions to leverage resources, influence systems, modify relationships among partners, and act as catalysts for transforming policies, programs, and practices. (Chapter 1: What Is Community Engagement? | Principles of Community Engagement | ATSDR, n.d.).

Empowering citizens at the local level holds significance, as it fosters increased engagement in broader political processes, as emphasized by Pante (2014). This empowerment is particularly crucial for Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) advocating for marginalized community sectors. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (2018) stresses that community engagement should be an integral part of all efforts to make humanitarian response more accountable, inclusive, and empowering, thereby enhancing community participation and the overall quality of interventions. In practice, effective community engagement involves establishing mechanisms that ensure affected communities, irrespective of their sex, age, or social status, have access to the information they require to make informed decisions. It also ensures that their voices are heard by responding agencies and that these agencies are accountable for addressing issues or concerns raised by the community. (*Philippines: Community Engagement Strategy - Philippines*, 2018).

TABLES

Table 1. The extent of participation of CSO in formulating policies and ordinances in the community

| Statement | Mean | SD | Quantitative Description | Qualifying Statement |
|---|------|-----|--------------------------|---|
| 1. Policy recommendations and viewpoints are based on | 3.22 | 0.8 | Sometimes | Civil society organizations (CSOs) can engage |

| | | | | | |
|----|---|------|-----|-----------|--|
| | the socio-economic requirements of the local population | | | | in the decision-making process |
| 2. | Asserts rights in community decision-making | 3.14 | 0.9 | Sometimes | Civil society organizations (CSOs) can engage in the decision-making process |
| 3. | Legislation based on NEDA/RPD O Development Plan | 3.02 | 0.8 | Sometimes | Civil society organizations (CSOs) can engage in the decision-making process |
| 4. | Legislation takes into account the opinions and perspective of young people | 3.37 | 0.9 | Sometimes | Civil society organizations (CSOs) can engage in the decision-making process |
| 5. | Wider dissemination of legislated ordinance | 3.11 | 1 | Sometimes | Civil society organizations (CSOs) can engage in the decision-making process |
| | OVERALL | 3.17 | | Sometimes | Civil society organizations (CSOs) can engage in the decision-making process |

Table 2. The involvement of civil society organizations in the process of planning for development

| Statement | Mean | SD | Quantitative Description | Qualifying Statement |
|---|------|-----|--------------------------|--|
| 1. Plans are based on community needs | 3.34 | 0.9 | Sometimes | The CSO can participate in decision-making |
| 2. CSOs participate in the bidding | 3.14 | 1.1 | Sometimes | The CSO can participate in decision-making |
| 3. Involve other stakeholders in planning | 3.08 | 1.1 | Sometimes | The CSO can participate in decision-making |
| 4. Contribute innovative ideas in | 3.22 | 1.0 | Sometimes | The CSO can participate in |

| | | | | | |
|--|------|-----|------------|---|-----------------|
| formulating a Development Plan | | | | | decision-making |
| 5. Finalization of plans is based on consensus | 3.48 | 0.8 | Very Often | The CSO can properly participate in decision-making | |
| OVER ALL | 3.25 | | Sometimes | The CSO can participate in decision-making | |

Table 3. The involvement of non-governmental organizations in the implementation of programs

| Statement | Mean | SD | Quantitative Description | Qualifying Statement |
|---|------|-----|--------------------------|--|
| 1. CSOs involve community people in Project Implementation | 3.22 | 0.8 | Sometimes | The CSO can participate in decision-making |
| 2. There is sufficient budget for their Implemented Programs | 3.14 | 0.9 | Sometimes | The CSO can participate in decision-making |
| 3. Programs are relevant to the needs of the people in the target areas | 3.02 | 0.8 | Sometimes | The CSO can participate in decision-making |
| 4. Consult the community before implementing programs | 3.37 | 0.9 | Sometimes | The CSO can participate in decision-making |
| 5. Empower the community for project sustainability | 3.11 | 1 | Sometimes | The CSO can participate in decision-making |
| OVER ALL | 3.17 | | Sometimes | The CSO can participate in decision-making |

Table 4. The extent of participation of CSOs in Monitoring and Evaluation

| Statement | Mean | SD | Qualitative Description | Qualifying Statement |
|--|------|-----|-------------------------|---|
| 1. There are established monitoring criteria | 3.37 | 0.9 | Sometimes | The CSO can participate in decision-making |
| 2. Submitted accomplishment reports of the programs and projects implemented | 3.45 | 1.0 | Very Often | The CSO can properly participate in decision-making |

| | | | | |
|---|------|-----|------------|---|
| 3. Ensure accountability in project monitoring and evaluation | 3.37 | 0.9 | Sometimes | The CSO can participate in decision-making |
| 4. There are established rules for evaluation | 3.48 | 1.0 | Very Often | The CSO can properly participate in decision-making |
| 5. Report anomalies during program implementation | 3.37 | 1.0 | Sometimes | The CSO can participate in decision-making |
| OVER ALL | 3.40 | | Very Often | The CSO can properly participate in decision-making |

2. METHODS

This research utilized a descriptive analysis method, which involves utilizing statistical techniques to provide a summary of a dataset. The purpose was to assess the involvement of civil society organizations in the decision-making process of a district located in the southern Philippines with a population of 7,567 and coordinates of approximately 8,0276.1885 on the Southern Philippines island. The participants of this study were selected members of various community-based organizations, including six (6) barangay health workers, nine (90) youth organization members, three (3) district officials, five (5) farmers association members, three (3) chapel officers, five (5) women's organization members, and four (4) senior citizens.

To gather the necessary data for the study, a survey questionnaire was utilized. The questionnaire consisted of closed-ended questions with a set of categories as response options for the participants. The instrument was designed specifically to gather information relevant to the research objectives. Before collecting data from the participants, the researcher obtained permission from the district authority by sending a formal request letter to conduct the survey in the specified area. The participants were provided with a consent form and informed about the conditions and regulations associated with responding to the survey questions.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. The level of involvement of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in developing policies and ordinances within the community.

The results of the extent of Civil Society Organizations' (CSOs) participation in formulating policies and ordinances in the community are presented in Table 1. Based on the collected data, the study found that prioritizing the input of young people and addressing the socio-economic needs of the local population in legislation received the highest scores. This implies that in a district of the southern

Philippines, the CSO was occasionally involved in formulating policies and ordinances in these two areas. Niang (2019) emphasized the value of the youth in the economy, citing their qualities such as agility, adaptability, and receptivity, as well as their understanding of the gig economy and contemporary employment dynamics, which highlights their significance. Additionally, their proactive engagement with evolving trends underscores their significance within the workforce. Enabling the empowerment of youth and nurturing their decision-making skills within the framework of good governance is identified as a crucial endeavor in ensuring effective leadership in the future (*Youth in Local Governance Program*, n.d.).

On the other hand, addressing the socio-economic requirements of the local population in legislation got the second highest score based on data analysis. In the Philippines, people care about making life better for everyone. They want to help local areas grow economically by giving people the power to improve their own lives (Garcia & Paguia, 2018). Republic Act (RA) No. 7160 says that important tasks from higher levels of government are passed down to local governments. This lets them focus on programs that are important and can make money for the local community. However, the result reveals that the CSO's engagement in considering this variable in decision-making was limited. It implies that the district officials are more capable of prioritizing it, knowing that they have enough funds allotted to address the needs of the local citizens.

Moreover, the findings show that the CSO can participate at times in asserting the rights of the community, crafting policies based on the NEDA/RPDO Development Plan, and widening the dissemination of legislated ordinances in a district. It is observed that the CSO lacks government support from the district legislature. The existence of CSOs is a sign of the willingness of the public to engage in development, but their capacity to constructively do so needs to be developed (ADB, 2013). Yasay (2018) stated that among the many challenges faced by CSOs in implementing their programs and projects are a lack of funding and human resources, a lack of government support, and political patronage. Many CSOs are dependent on external funding and are affected by a lack of staff for the next generation and weak internal governance. Further, the overall findings suggest that the engagement of the CSO in decision-making in terms of formulating policies and ordinances in a district was limited.

3.2. The involvement of civil society organizations in the process of planning for development

The analysis of data suggests that civil society organizations (CSOs) frequently participate in consensus – based planning during the decision-making process of a district legislature, indicating their involvement in development planning. It is essential to recognize significant decisions and seek agreement among stakeholders in development planning. Moreover, the data reveals that CSOs participate in planning based on community members and ensure that their concerns, needs, and aspirations are heard and considered. CSOs ensure that development plans address the needs of all community members, including women, youth, indigenous peoples, and other vulnerable populations.

Although their involvement in formulating policies and ordinances is limited, their contribution to development planning is highly relevant and effective.

3.3. The involvement of non-governmental organizations in the implementation of programs

Table 3 provides an interpretation of the data on the participation of civil society organizations (CSOs) in the decision-making process of a district concerning program and project implementation. The data analysis suggests that CSOs frequently engage in community consultation before conducting projects and programs, receiving the highest score. Zepeda (2024) argues that public consultation is a way for governments and organizations to obtain opinions and thoughts from various stakeholders that could affect society. It is essential to consider the voices, opinions, and suggestions of the stakeholders, including the wider community, businesses, NGOs, community groups, and experts. Public consultation has its roots in the historical evolution of participatory democracy, which seeks to encourage greater and more direct public engagement in governing the state.

Moreover, the data shows that CSOs are involved in engaging people in project implementation when making decisions in a district. Their engagement contributes to achieving the goals and objectives of a district. This concept is supported by Edward (2005), who views CSOs as the "public sphere" that cares about the common good, shared interests, and the willingness to accommodate others with opposing views to pursue common goals. However, the data interpretation also shows that CSOs have limitations in participating in evaluating the relevance of the projects and programs implemented to the needs of the people. It suggests that district officials focus more on assessing and evaluating the people's needs when establishing projects and programs in the target area.

3.4. The extent of participation of CSO in Monitoring and Evaluation

Table 4 presents the involvement of civil society organizations (CSOs) in monitoring and evaluating the decision-making process of a district in southern Philippines. The monitoring process is a global phenomenon (Kanyamuna, 2019), and it involves tracking progress against set targets by collecting data in a timely and accurate manner (Govender & Reddy, 2014). The data analysis indicates that CSOs ensure monitoring and evaluation criteria and rules are followed when making decisions. The purpose of evaluation criteria is to provide a normative framework to assess a specific intervention consistently and of high quality. It can be used in processes beyond evaluation, such as defining frameworks and indicators for monitoring and results management, funding approval, strategic planning, and intervention design to improve future interventions (Author_Id, 2010). Furthermore, the results show that CSOs contribute to submitting accomplishment reports for the programs and projects implemented in the target areas of a district in southern Philippines.

4. CONCLUSION

Civil society groups play a crucial role as intermediaries, advocates, specialists, executors, and monitors, prioritizing inclusion and promoting collaboration between the public and private sectors. By actively involving civil society in decision-making processes, businesses, governments, and alliances can achieve inclusive outcomes, mitigate inequality, protect the environment, and safeguard civil liberties (Strengthening Public-Private Cooperation with Civil Society, 2024). This article aims to assess the extent of civil society organization (CSO) participation in the decision-making process of a district in the southern Philippines. It examines the extent of CSO participation in formulating policies and ordinances in the community, local development planning, program implementation, monitoring, and evaluation, and directs the district's priority toward civil society participation in decision-making processes.

Using descriptive analysis and a closed-ended questionnaire approach, the results indicate that CSO engagement in formulating policies and ordinances in a district is limited. However, the data reveals their involvement in prioritizing the youth's voice when making suggestions and opinions related to existing issues concerning young people. They also give policy suggestions and opinions on the socio-economic needs of the local people. Nonetheless, the CSO occasionally practices the wider dissemination system of the legislated ordinances in a district. On the other hand, the data shows that CSOs frequently participate in consensus-based planning during the decision-making process of a district. They ensure that development plans cater to the requirements of every sector of the community, including women, young people, indigenous communities, and other marginalized groups. They engage in assessing the community's needs to address their concerns and improve public and private partnerships.

Moreover, the results reveal the engagement of CSOs in program implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. The data shows that CSOs are involved in community consultation before conducting projects and programs, receiving the highest score based on the data analysis. They also engage in ensuring the established rules for evaluation and require the submission of accomplishment reports of the projects and programs implemented in the target area. However, this study has limitations, including a relatively modest sample size, which only comprises community-based organizations within the district, leading to limited information. Additionally, the correlation among statements per indicator could result in potential redundancy of information, which could influence the study's outcomes. In conclusion, the findings suggest that CSOs have the potential to participate in every aspect of the decision-making process within a district, benefiting the public. However, certain constraints were evident in the data analysis. To enhance CSO involvement in decision-making processes, district officials must strengthen partnerships between NGOs, CSOs, and other private sectors, address gaps and deficiencies in service delivery, and develop initiatives to devise solutions for emerging challenges in the target area. Future researchers should acknowledge the study's limitations and consider including district officials and staff as respondents to acquire a comprehensive understanding of the topic.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The researcher extends heartfelt appreciation to all who played a part in the completion of this research paper.

- a. The researcher is grateful to the district head and officials for granting permission to conduct data gathering with ethical considerations.
- b. Gratitude is extended to the participants who generously contributed their time and insights, without whom this research endeavor would not have been achievable.

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