

Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and Barangay Governance: Participation Dynamics in a Rural Philippine Province

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ABSTRACT

Civil society organizations (CSOs) are recognized as important actors in participatory governance, providing avenues for citizen engagement in local decision-making processes. However, little is known about how CSOs experience participation in barangay governance, particularly in rural and resource-constrained settings. This study analyzed the experiences of CSO representatives in barangay governance in Samar, Philippines. Using a descriptive qualitative design, data were collected through focus group discussion (FGD) of CSO representatives from various sectors across the province. The data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's Reflexive Thematic Analysis. Four themes emerged: (1) service and livelihood as dual motivations for participation; (2) participation through access and representation; (3) participation largely symbolic; and (4) CSO reimagination of meaningful participation. The findings revealed that CSOs participate in governance primarily through barangay assemblies, consultations, and community activities, driven by both civic commitment and developmental aspirations. However, participation was largely limited to consultation and information-sharing, with minimal involvement in planning and budgeting processes. Participants frequently described opportunities to express concerns but limited influence over governance outcomes. Barriers to meaningful participation included inadequate information dissemination, weak institutional recognition, limited governance literacy, and local political dynamics. Despite these constraints, participants emphasized the importance of capacity-building, stronger institutional support, collaboration, and more inclusive governance practices. The study concludes that while CSO participation in Samar is institutionally present, it remains substantively constrained, underscoring the need to strengthen mechanisms that enable civil society actors to become more meaningful partners in local governance through stronger inclusion in planning and budgeting processes, improved information dissemination, sustained capacity-building initiatives, and further research involving other governance stakeholders.

Keywords: barangay governance; citizen participation; civil society organizations; deliberative democracy; participatory governance

INTRODUCTION

Civil society organizations (CSOs) are widely recognized as important actors in democratic governance because they provide mechanisms through which citizens can participate in public affairs and articulate collective interests. It is also an avenue for them to hold government institutions accountable. As intermediaries between citizens and the state, CSOs contribute to policy advocacy, service delivery, community mobilization, and participatory decision-making processes. Their involvement in governance has increasingly been viewed as essential to improving accountability, transparency, responsiveness, and democratic legitimacy, particularly at the local level where government decisions directly affect communities (Asian Development Bank, 2020; Ibones et al., 2024).

In the Philippines, the institutionalization of citizen participation was significantly strengthened through the enactment of the Local Government Code (LGC) of 1991 which formally recognized the role of civil society in local governance. The LGC created opportunities for CSOs to participate in local development councils, local special bodies, barangay assemblies, and other governance mechanisms intended to democratize decision-making processes. Over the past three decades, these reforms have expanded spaces for civic engagement and strengthened the recognition of CSOs as governance partners (Atienza & Go, 2023). Nevertheless, studies

continue to report persistent implementation challenges associated with political patronage, resource limitations, elite dominance, and unequal participation, raising concerns regarding the extent to which institutionalized participation translates into meaningful influence over governance outcomes (Atienza & Go, 2023; Medina-Guce, 2020).

These concerns are particularly important at the barangay level which serves as the primary arena of citizen-government interaction in the Philippines. In the Philippine context, a barangay refers to the smallest political and administrative unit of government and serves as the primary venue for local governance, community participation, service delivery, and grassroots decision-making (Porio & Sarmiento, 2019; Republic Act No. 7160, 1991). As the basic political unit, the barangays are expected to facilitate participatory governance through assemblies, consultations, development planning activities, and committee structures that enable citizens and organized groups to contribute to local decision-making. However, existing studies suggest that participation within barangay governance remains uneven. Yusingco (2022) found that while barangay assemblies have the potential to strengthen civic engagement and political discourse, their effectiveness is often undermined by elite dominance and weak facilitation. Similarly, Arrabaca and Base (2020) and Montes et al. (2020) reported that participation frequently remains passive due to unclear mandates, inadequate facilitation, and limited citizen influence on governance decisions. These findings suggest that the existence of participatory spaces does not necessarily guarantee meaningful participation.

Recent studies on CSO engagement in governance have likewise documented multiple barriers that constrain effective participation. Political influence, resource limitations, weak government support, power imbalances, and unclear institutional roles continue to affect the ability of CSOs to engage substantively in governance processes (Bhuiyan et al., 2023; Cahimtung & Tenorio, 2024; Pasamonte, 2024). Research on government-CSO collaboration similarly highlights the importance of trust, communication, role clarity, and equitable power-sharing in facilitating meaningful participation (Rao et al., 2023; Carmichael et al., 2023). Despite these insights, existing scholarship has largely focused on institutional arrangements, policy frameworks, and governance outcomes, providing limited understanding of how participation is experienced by CSO actors themselves.

While previous studies have substantially contributed to understanding the institutional and structural dimensions of participatory governance, relatively few have examined participation from the perspective of CSO actors operating within the day-to-day realities of local governance. Existing research has predominantly assessed participation in terms of formal mechanisms, legal mandates, governance outcomes, or government-CSO relationships, often overlooking how civil society representatives themselves interpret, negotiate, and experience participation within governance spaces. Moreover, studies focusing specifically on barangay-level governance remain limited despite the barangay's central role as the primary site of citizen-government interaction in the Philippines. This gap is particularly evident in geographically peripheral and underrepresented contexts such as Samar, where local political dynamics, development conditions, and governance practices may shape participation in distinct ways. By focusing on the lived experiences of CSO representatives, the present study complements existing literature by moving beyond institutional assessments to examine how participation is understood and practiced at the grassroots level. In doing so, it extends current scholarship by providing context-specific qualitative evidence on the opportunities, constraints, meanings, and realities of CSO participation in barangay governance, thereby contributing a deeper and more nuanced understanding of participatory governance in local settings.

This study is anchored on Social Capital Theory, Deliberative Democracy Theory, and Habermas' Theory of Communicative Action. These theoretical perspectives provide complementary lenses for understanding how CSOs participate in barangay governance, engage in public deliberation, and navigate institutional and political structures that shape participation.

Social Capital Theory posits that civic associations foster networks of trust, reciprocity, and collective action that facilitate citizen participation and strengthen democratic governance (Putnam, 1993). Through participation in voluntary organizations, individuals develop social connections and shared norms that encourage cooperation and civic engagement. In the context of this study, CSOs are viewed as important repositories of social capital that connect citizens to governance processes and provide avenues for collective action and community

participation. The theory helps explain the motivations for participation and the role of civic associations in promoting community engagement and local development.

Complementing this perspective is Deliberative Democracy Theory, which emphasizes the importance of inclusive participation, public reasoning, and dialogue in democratic decision-making (Dryzek, 2000). The theory argues that democratic legitimacy is strengthened when citizens are afforded meaningful opportunities to deliberate on issues affecting their communities and contribute to collective decisions. This perspective is particularly relevant to barangay governance where assemblies, meetings, consultations, and community gatherings are intended to serve as spaces for citizen engagement. It provides a framework for examining whether these participatory mechanisms facilitate meaningful involvement or merely procedural forms of participation.

Habermas' Theory of Communicative Action further enriches this analysis by focusing on the role of communication in democratic life (Habermas, 1984, 1987). According to Habermas, democratic participation is most meaningful when individuals are able to engage in dialogue characterized by mutual understanding, reason-giving, and the free exchange of ideas. The theory highlights the importance of communicative spaces where citizens can articulate concerns and question decisions, being able to participate in public discourse without domination or exclusion. Within this study, the theory provides a lens for understanding how CSO representatives experience dialogue, consultation, recognition, and influence within barangay governance processes.

Understanding these experiences is important because participation cannot be adequately assessed through institutional provisions alone. Formal mechanisms may create opportunities for engagement but they do not necessarily reveal whether participation is meaningful or empowering. Capturing the lived experiences of CSO representatives allows for a deeper understanding of how participatory governance functions in practice and whether institutionalized spaces genuinely facilitate citizen influence in local decision-making.

Statement of the Problem

The study sought to explore the participation dynamics of barangay-based CSOs in Samar, Philippines. Specifically, it answered the following questions: 1) how do CSO representatives experience participation in barangay governance processes and participatory spaces, and; 2) what insights can be drawn from the experiences of CSO representatives to strengthen participatory governance at the barangay level?

METHODS AND MATERIALS

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to explore the experiences of CSOs in participating in barangay governance in Samar Province, Philippines. It provides rich and comprehensive accounts of participants' experiences while remaining closely grounded in their narratives and perspectives. The design is appropriate to understand how individuals interpret and make sense of their experiences within a particular social context (Creswell and Poth, 2018). This approach enabled the study to explore how CSO representatives access governance spaces, participate in governance activities, interact with local officials, and navigate the opportunities and challenges associated with their involvement in barangay governance.

Research Setting

The study was conducted in Samar Province, Philippines. Samar presents a particularly relevant context for examining civil society participation because of its active network of community-based organizations, people's organizations, sectoral groups, cooperatives, and other civil society actors engaged in local development initiatives. The province also faces persistent development challenges associated with poverty, geographical isolation, disaster vulnerability, and governance capacity constraints, making citizen participation an important component of local governance processes. Despite these, the barangays in Samar serve as primary venues for citizen engagement through assemblies, consultations, committee meetings, and local planning activities. These governance spaces provide opportunities for CSOs to participate in governance processes and contribute to community decision-making.

Participants and Sampling

Participants in the study consisted of representatives of civil society organizations actively engaged in barangay governance activities within Samar Province. They were selected from the available database of the Department of the Interior and Local Government Samar Field Office. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to identify information-rich participants who possessed direct experience relevant to the research objectives (Tajik et al, 2025). Participants who were included in the study are those who satisfied the following criteria: 1) must be at least 18 years old and willing to provide informed consent to participate in the study; 2) must have been an active member of a CSO for at least three months prior to data collection to ensure familiarity with the organization's operations and advocacy, and; 3) must have direct experience participating in at least one barangay-level governance activity within the twelve months preceding the conduct of the study.

Meanwhile, the following were excluded from the study: 1) members of a civil society organization who were not formally designated as representatives in engagements with barangay governance mechanisms; 2) individuals who had not actively participated in organizational activities or community engagements within the three months preceding data collection; 3) individuals who simultaneously held formal government positions, including barangay officials, barangay staff, local government unit personnel, Department of the Interior and Local Government employees, or other government-affiliated positions, in order to preserve the independence of CSO representation, and; 4) individuals who were unable to provide informed consent due to cognitive or language limitations, or those who declined participation.

A total of eight focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted involving approximately fifty participants representing various civil society organizations across Samar Province. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved, indicated by the recurrence of similar narratives, experiences, and patterns across successive discussions.

Data Collection

Data were gathered through FGDs. These facilitate collective reflection and interaction among participants allowing researchers to capture shared experiences and differing perspectives. This method was particularly appropriate for exploring governance experiences because participation in barangay governance is inherently social and often occurs through interactions among multiple stakeholders.

Each focus group discussion consisted of CSO representatives who shared experiences related to participation in barangay governance activities, including barangay assemblies, consultations, committee meetings, development planning activities, monitoring initiatives, and other governance-related engagements. Discussions were guided by a semi-structured interview protocol designed to elicit participants' experiences, perceptions, challenges, and recommendations regarding their involvement in barangay governance. This method is widely utilized in qualitative data collection (Ruslin et al, 2022).

The discussions were conducted in languages familiar to participants, including Waray-Waray and Filipino, to facilitate comfortable and authentic expression of experiences. Each session lasted approximately one to one-and-a-half hours and was audio-recorded with participant permission. Field notes were likewise maintained throughout the discussions to document contextual observations and non-verbal interactions.

Treatment of Data

The study utilized Braun and Clarke's (2006; 2019) Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) to analyze qualitative data. Reflexive thematic analysis is a flexible and theoretically adaptable method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within qualitative datasets. The approach was selected because it enables systematic analysis while remaining sensitive to participants' experiences and contextual realities.

The process began with repeated reading of verbatim transcripts and field notes to facilitate familiarity with the data and identify initial insights. To enhance analytical rigor, coding was conducted iteratively throughout the analysis. Meaningful segments of text related to CSO participation in barangay governance were assigned initial codes and subsequently grouped into categories based on conceptual similarities. Through repeated engagement

with the transcripts, categories were refined until coherent subthemes and themes emerged. The developing themes were continuously reviewed against the dataset to ensure that they accurately reflected participants' narratives and the broader patterns evident across the focus group discussions. The final themes were then interpreted in relation to the study objectives, relevant literature, and theoretical framework, with significant participant quotations used to illustrate key findings and preserve the authenticity of participants' voices.

Measures of Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of the study was established through the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Several strategies were employed throughout the research process to ensure the rigor and quality of the findings.

Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with the data and iterative analysis. The researcher conducted eight focus group discussions involving approximately 50 civil society organization (CSO) representatives from various sectors across Samar. Audio-recorded discussions were transcribed verbatim and repeatedly reviewed to facilitate familiarity and immersion in the dataset. Field notes taken during the discussions were examined alongside the transcripts to provide contextual understanding and support the interpretation of participants' accounts. The iterative nature of Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) Reflexive Thematic Analysis further strengthened credibility by allowing themes to be continuously reviewed and refined against the dataset.

Transferability was addressed through the provision of rich descriptions of the research setting, participant characteristics, data collection procedures, and thematic findings. Detailed contextual information regarding the experiences of CSO representatives in barangay governance was provided to enable readers to determine the applicability of the findings to similar contexts and settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Dependability was established through the maintenance of a systematic audit trail documenting the research process. Records were kept regarding participant recruitment, focus group procedures, transcription, coding, category development, theme refinement, and analytical decisions. The use of Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) six-phase analytical framework provided a transparent and systematic process through which the findings were generated and interpreted.

Confirmability was ensured through a research journal in the duration of the study. The journal documented the researcher's reflections and potential biases that may have influenced the study. Through this, the researcher ensured that the findings remained grounded in participants' narratives rather than the researcher's personal perspectives. Furthermore, verbatim quotations were incorporated into the presentation of findings to demonstrate the direct relationship between the data and the interpretations generated from them (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Through these measures, the foundation of trustworthiness of the study was established and it supported the credibility of the findings regarding the experiences of CSO representatives in barangay governance.

Ethical Consideration

This study strictly adhered to ethical guidelines to ensure protection and respect for all participants. Prior to participation, all prospective participants were informed of the purpose of the research, the nature of their involvement, potential risks and benefits, and their rights as research participants. Written informed consent was obtained before participation in the focus group discussions. Participation was entirely voluntary and participants were informed of their right to decline participation or withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty or consequence. To protect confidentiality and anonymity, identifying information was removed from transcripts and replaced with participant codes. Audio recordings, transcripts, field notes, and other materials were securely stored in password-protected devices accessible only to the researcher.

Given the governance-related nature of the discussions, particular attention was given to protecting participants from potential social or political risks associated with sharing their experiences and perspectives. Participants were assured that information would be reported in aggregate form and that no statements would be attributed to

identifiable individuals or organizations without explicit permission. All data were handled in accordance with applicable ethical standards governing qualitative research involving human participants.

Most importantly, an ethical approval was obtained for the study. The researcher declares no conflict of interest in the conduct of this study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Consistent with the reflexive thematic analysis approach, themes were developed through iterative engagement with the data and researcher reflexivity rather than through statistical validation procedures. The emphasis was placed on generating a coherent and contextually grounded interpretation of participants' experiences. Thus, the following themes.

Theme 1 - Service and Livelihood as Dual Motivations for Participation

Theme 1 presents that participation in CSOs is driven by a convergence of civic commitment and developmental aspirations. Across the eight FGDs, participants consistently described their involvement in CSOs as motivated by a desire to contribute to community welfare while simultaneously seeking opportunities to improve the socioeconomic conditions of their organizations, sectors, and consequently, their households. Rather than functioning as separate motivations, service and livelihood concerns were deeply intertwined in participants' narratives, reflecting the realities of grassroots organizations operating in resource-constrained communities. This dual orientation shaped how participants understood the purpose of their organizations and the value of engaging in barangay governance.

Subtheme A: Community Service as a Civic Motivation

A recurring narrative across the FGDs was the desire to help one's community. Participants frequently framed their involvement in CSOs as an opportunity to contribute to barangay development, supporting their fellow residents and participating in activities that could improve collective welfare. When asked why they joined their organizations, respondents often emphasized service-oriented motivations rather than personal gain.

For instance, one participant explained:

“Para makabulig gihap ako kun ano an mga buruhaton han amon barangay.” [so that I could also help in whatever activities or work our barangay is doing.]

Similarly, another respondent stated:

“Para makabulig han amon grupo.” [to help our organization]

In another discussion, participants emphasized that organizational membership allowed them to participate in activities that could benefit both their sector and the wider community. These statements demonstrate that many respondents perceived participation as a means of contributing to collective welfare rather than merely advancing individual interests. The repeated use of the word *makabulig* (to help) across several FGDs suggests that service remains a central organizing principle of grassroots participation.

Beyond helping the community, some participants viewed organizational involvement as a form of representation. They perceived themselves as responsible for communicating the concerns of their sectors and ensuring that community needs reached local government officials. Such narratives indicate that participants understood their organizations not merely as vehicles for resource acquisition but also as mechanisms through which citizens could collectively articulate local concerns.

These findings support observations by Atienza and Quilala (2021) who argue that Philippine CSOs increasingly perform multiple functions simultaneously including community mobilization, service delivery, advocacy, and local development. Similarly, Pasamonte (2024) observed that many grassroots organizations in local governance settings operate as intermediaries that connect communities with governance institutions while simultaneously

addressing developmental concerns. The experiences of Samar's CSO representatives reflect these multifunctional roles demonstrating that participation often begins with a desire to contribute to community welfare.

The findings also resonate with Social Capital Theory which posits that voluntary associations cultivate norms of reciprocity, trust, and cooperation that encourage collective action (Putnam 1993). Participants' emphasis on helping others and supporting community initiatives while working collectively suggests that CSOs continue to function as important sites for generating social capital. Through organizational participation, individuals develop relationships and networks that facilitate cooperation and strengthen community engagement.

Subtheme B: Livelihood and Development as Participation Incentives

While civic motivations were prominent, participants also emphasized the developmental and economic dimensions of their participation. Across all FGDs, respondents repeatedly linked organizational membership to opportunities for accessing government assistance, agricultural support, infrastructure projects, livelihood programs, and technical training. For many participants, CSOs served as essential channels through which communities could obtain resources that would otherwise be difficult to access.

One participant explained:

“Para makaavail kami han assistance nga ginhahatag han gobyerno.” [so we can avail of government assistance]

Another participant described participation in terms of household welfare:

“Para maka dugang-dugang liwat para pag finance han amon pamilya.” [so that it can somehow add for the finances of our family]

Likewise, another respondent summarized the goal of participation as:

“Para magin maunlad kami.” [for us to become progressive]

These statements demonstrate that participation is strongly connected to aspirations for economic improvement. Participants frequently associated organizational success with the acquisition of farm machinery, agricultural inputs, livelihood assistance, infrastructure projects, and financial support. In many cases, respondents measured the effectiveness of their organizations through tangible developmental outcomes rather than through political influence or policy change.

The prominence of livelihood concerns reflects the socioeconomic realities confronting many communities in Samar. Participants represented organizations composed largely of farmers, fisherfolk, irrigators, women's groups, cooperatives, and livelihood-based associations whose members face persistent challenges related to poverty, limited market access, inadequate infrastructure, and economic vulnerability. Under such conditions, participation in governance cannot be divorced from struggles for survival and development.

This finding is consistent with the work of Ibones et al. (2024), who found that grassroots organizations often engage governance institutions primarily to secure resources and services necessary for community development. Similarly, Atienza and Go (2023) observed that local governance participation in the Philippines frequently intersects with developmental concerns because communities continue to rely heavily on government support for infrastructure and social services. Rather than viewing participation solely as a democratic exercise, citizens often engage governance spaces to negotiate access to resources that improve local welfare.

International scholarship likewise supports this interpretation. Gaventa and Barrett (2012), in their analysis of citizen engagement initiatives across multiple countries, found that participation frequently generates developmental outcomes alongside democratic ones. They argue that citizen engagement is often valued because it contributes to improvements in the access of public services and resources, and community welfare. Edwards (2014) similarly notes that CSOs often operate simultaneously as development actors, as advocates and service

providers. The experiences of Samar's CSOs reflect these observations. Participants did not distinguish sharply between democratic participation and developmental objectives. Rather, the two were viewed as interconnected.

Importantly, respondents rarely portrayed livelihood concerns as individualistic. Instead, economic development was understood as a collective aspiration. Participants consistently framed resource acquisition and livelihood support as means of helping organizations and communities rather than merely benefiting themselves. This suggests that developmental participation itself is experienced as a form of community service.

Subtheme C: Learning and Information-Seeking as Motivations for Participation

Another motivation that emerged from the discussions was the desire to acquire knowledge and remain informed about governance processes, programs, projects, and activities (PPAs). Several participants explained that organizational participation enabled them to learn about government initiatives and understand developments affecting their communities.

One participant stated:

“Para mahibaro ako kun ano an mga proyekto.” [for me to know what the projects are]

Similarly, another respondent explained:

“Para mahibaroan naton mga pag implement han project.” [for us to know the implementation of projects]

These statements reveal that participants also value the informational opportunities associated with governance engagement. Being informed about PPAs and local initiatives allows CSOs to better understand community developments and monitor activities that affect their sectors.

The importance of information emerged repeatedly throughout the FGDs. Participants often described participation as a means of staying updated regarding government interventions, funding opportunities, development programs, and organizational responsibilities. Such narratives suggest that information itself functions as a valuable participatory resource.

This finding supports Habermas' (1984, 1987) Theory of Communicative Action which emphasizes the importance of communication and information exchange in democratic life. Participants sought involvement not only to receive material benefits but also to gain understanding of governance processes. Through assemblies, meetings, consultations, and other deliberative gatherings, CSO representatives attempted to access information necessary for meaningful engagement in public affairs.

The findings are likewise consistent with deliberative democratic scholarship which argues that informed participation is essential for meaningful citizen engagement (Dryzek, 2000; Bächtiger et al., 2018). Citizens must possess sufficient information to evaluate policies and articulate concerns in public deliberation. Participants' desire to learn about PPAs and governance processes demonstrates recognition of this need. However, as subsequent themes reveal, access to information alone does not necessarily translate into influence over governance decisions.

Theme 2 - Participation Through Access and Representation

Theme 2 encapsulates the CSO experience of participation in identified spaces and the kind of engagement they have within those spaces. The findings reveal that CSO participation in barangay governance is primarily experienced through access to governance spaces rather than direct involvement in governance decisions. Across all FGDs, participants consistently identified open forums in barangay assemblies, meetings, consultations, and community activities as the primary avenues through which they engage in local governance. However, while these spaces provide opportunities for presence and expression, participation remains highly dependent on invitations or awareness, and institutional openness. Consequently, CSOs frequently experience participation as attendance and representation rather than substantive involvement in decision-making processes.

Subtheme A: Barangay Assemblies as the Primary Governance Space

Among all governance mechanisms discussed during the FGDs, barangay assemblies emerged as the most accessible and familiar venue for participation. Participants consistently referred to assemblies as the primary setting where they participate, receive information, interact with barangay officials, and communicate concerns affecting their organizations and communities.

One participant directly stated:

“During barangay assembly. Pag during open forum.” [During barangay assembly, during open forum]

Similarly, another respondent described assemblies as the only venue where organizational concerns are raised before barangay officials:

“Didto la kami nakakagayakan kun may assembly.” [We are only able to speak during assemblies.]

Participants from other discussions echoed similar experiences. One respondent explained that organizational involvement usually occurs when barangay assemblies are convened and community members are gathered to discuss local concerns:

“Ha assembly man kami kadam-an nakakaistorya han mga problema han barangay.” [It is in assemblies where we are usually able to share our problems.]

Another participant likewise emphasized that assemblies constitute the primary avenue through which citizens receive updates regarding projects and governance activities:

“Didto namon nahibabaroan an mga proyekto ngan mga buruhaton han barangay.” [It is where we are made aware of the projects being implemented by the barangay.]

These narratives indicate that barangay assemblies continue to serve as the most visible participatory institution at the grassroots level. This finding reflects the intent of the Local Government Code of 1991, which institutionalized barangay assemblies as mechanisms for citizen participation and local accountability. Similar observations have been reported by Brillantes and Fernandez (2011) who argue that participatory institutions have become increasingly embedded within local governance structures. However, the existence of participatory spaces does not automatically translate into meaningful participation. As subsequent findings reveal, access to these spaces often remains concentrated in consultation and information-sharing.

Subtheme B: Participation in Community Activities

Beyond assemblies, participants frequently described participation through community-oriented activities such as *pintakasi* or clean-up drives, organizational meetings, and collective projects. These activities provided opportunities for organizations to collaborate with barangay officials and contribute to local development efforts.

One participant explained:

“Ha pintakasi la kami nagpartisipar.” [We are only able to participate in community cleanup drives.]

Similarly, another respondent noted:

“Nakikigkooperar man kami ha pintakasi.” [We cooperate during community cleanup drives.]

Participants from other FGDs likewise emphasized that organizational participation often involved communal work and community service activities:

“Kon may barangay activities, nakikig-upod kami para magbulig.” [If there are barangay activities, we usually go to help.]

Another participant described their involvement as primarily implementation-oriented:

“Ha mga proyekto nga ginhihimo han barangay, nakikig-participar kami pinaagi hin labor ngan bulig.”
[From the projects being implemented by the barangay, we usually participate through labor and whatever help]

These accounts demonstrate that CSOs’ participation is therefore not limited to formal meetings but extends to practical activities that directly support local development. The findings support Putnam's (1993) argument that civic associations generate social capital by fostering cooperation and collective problem-solving. Through activities such as *pintakasi*, organizations build relationships and strengthen community networks, all while cultivating shared responsibility for local development. Similarly, Edwards (2014) notes that civil society organizations frequently function as community development actors whose contributions extend beyond formal advocacy and governance roles.

Participants' narratives also suggest that these activities are primarily implementation-oriented. While organizations contribute mobilization and community support, they are less frequently involved in planning, determining priorities, allocating resources, or shaping policy decisions. Consequently, participation remains strongest in implementation and weakest in decision-making.

Subtheme C: Participation Dependent on Invitation

A particularly prominent finding concerns the role of invitations and information dissemination in determining participation opportunities. Numerous participants explained that their ability to engage governance processes depended largely on whether barangay officials informed them of meetings or assemblies.

One respondent stated:

“Kinahanglan may invitation ni Kapitan ngadto han CSO President.” [There should be an invitation of the head of the barangay to the CSO president.]

Another participant described a similar experience:

“Kon waray impormasyon, diri liwat kami makakaattend.” [If we are not informed, we are not also able to attend.]

Participants from other discussions repeatedly associated exclusion from governance activities with failures in communication:

“Waray kami hibaro kay waray man kami maabisohi.” [We are not aware because we are not informed.]

Likewise, another respondent observed:

“Usahay waray kami naiimbitahan ngan nahibabaroan nala namon nga nahuman na an meeting.” [At times, we are not invited and later, we are made aware that the meetings was already done.]

Participation is evident as highly contingent upon communication practices. Although participatory mechanisms formally exist, organizations often depend on invitations and information dissemination to access them. Narratives that CSOs are not even recognized to participate are common, which leads to them being uninvited or uninformed. As a result, participation becomes conditional rather than institutionalized.

This finding is consistent with Medina-Guce's (2020) observation that civil society participation frequently depends on the willingness and capacity of government institutions to engage non-state actors. Fox (2015) similarly argues that transparency and information access constitute essential preconditions for meaningful participation because citizens cannot engage processes of which they are unaware. The experiences of participants demonstrate that information itself functions as a governance resource that shapes who participates and who remains excluded.

Subtheme D: Representation Through Voice and Expression

Participants consistently viewed themselves as representatives of their organizations and sectors. Many described participation as an opportunity to communicate concerns and advocate for projects that could benefit their communities.

One participant explained:

“Amon ginyayakan ngadto ha barangay an amon mga kinahanglanon.” [We usually tell the barangay about our needs and demands.]

Similarly, another respondent noted:

“Amo kami an nagrerepresentar han amon sektor.” [We are the ones representing our sectors.]

Participants also described using assemblies and consultations to communicate proposals and recommendations:

“Nakakapaglatag kami han amon mga suhestyon.” [We are able to lay down our suggestions.]

Another participant similarly observed:

“Nakakapagpahayag kami kun ano an amon panginahanglan.” [We are able to articulate our demands.]

These narratives indicate that participants generally perceive themselves as having opportunities to express concerns and communicate organizational priorities. Assemblies and consultations therefore function as important venues for representation. However, participants also distinguished representation from influence. While opportunities to speak were generally available, respondents frequently suggested that expressing concerns did not necessarily guarantee that these concerns would affect governance outcomes.

From the perspective of Habermas' (1984, 1987) Theory of Communicative Action, these governance spaces facilitate communication and public discourse by enabling citizens to articulate concerns and exchange perspectives with public officials. Yet communicative opportunities alone do not guarantee democratic legitimacy. Deliberative democratic scholars argue that participation becomes meaningful when citizen contributions are considered in decision-making processes and influence collective outcomes (Dryzek, 2000; Bächtiger et al., 2018). Participants' narratives suggest that while communicative opportunities exist, their effect on decisions are uncertain.

Theme 3 - Participation Largely Symbolic

Theme 3 highlights how participation of CSOs in barangay spaces has been largely symbolic. Across FGDs, participants repeatedly described situations in which they were allowed to attend meetings and express concerns and recommendations, yet remained largely excluded from the processes through which priorities were determined, budgets were allocated, and final decisions were made. As a result, participation was frequently experienced as symbolic rather than consequential. Participants, indeed, possessed voice but not necessarily influence.

Subtheme A: Expression as Endpoint of Participation

Participation often ended once concerns had been expressed. This was a recurring narrative across FGDs. Respondents acknowledged that barangay officials generally allowed them to speak during assemblies and consultations yet many felt that their recommendations were rarely translated into concrete actions, let alone, provided with the ways forward.

One participant articulated this frustration:

“Papalatagon ka la, hira la gihap it magbubuot.” [They only let you present, but they are still the ones who decide.]

Similarly, another participant explained:

“Tubtob la ha suhestyon.” [It ends with suggestions.]

The statements capture a common perception among participants. Although they were able to articulate concerns and present recommendations, final decisions remained concentrated among barangay officials. Participation therefore became limited to consultation rather than shared decision-making.

Several respondents elaborated further on this experience. One participant explained that CSOs were often invited to discuss concerns yet the implementation of projects reflected the preferences of local officials rather than community recommendations:

“Pag-abot han implementasyon, an ira an nasusunod.” [When it comes to implementation, it's their decision that is followed.]

Another participant similarly observed:

“Manmamati hira pero kon magdesisyon na, iba na liwat an mahitatabo.” [They will listen but when it has already been decided, an entirely different thing will happen.]

These statements suggest that participants distinguished between being heard and being able to influence. While local officials often listened to concerns, participants perceived that their inputs rarely shaped final governance outcomes. Thus, opportunities for expression did not necessarily translate into meaningful participation.

This finding reflects Arnstein's (1969) distinction between tokenistic and citizen-powered participation. Arnstein argued that consultation alone does not constitute meaningful participation when citizens lack the power to influence outcomes. The experiences of Samar's CSOs closely resemble what Arnstein described as tokenistic participation where citizens may be consulted but remain excluded from actual decision-making authority. Similarly, Fung (2006) argues that participatory governance should be evaluated not only by the existence of participatory spaces but also by the extent to which citizen inputs affect decisions.

Subtheme B: Exclusion from Planning and Budgeting Processes

The strongest evidence of constrained participation emerged in participants' accounts of planning and budgeting processes. Across multiple FGDs, respondents reported little to no involvement in governance activities where priorities, PPAs, resources, and other details were determined.

When participants were asked whether they had participated in barangay planning and budgeting, the response from some groups was immediate and unanimous:

“Waray.” [No.] (Multiple participants answered)

Participants from other discussions expressed comparable experiences. One respondent admitted:

“Hadi nga budgeting waray pa ak hito makakuan.” [I have not yet participated in budgeting.]

Another participant explained:

“Diri man ito hira naiinvolve ha pag-istorya han budgeting.” [They are not being engaged when it comes to discussions on budget.]

These accounts reveal that while CSOs frequently attend assemblies and community activities, they remain largely absent from budgeting discussions and planning processes. The distinction is particularly significant because planning and budgeting represent the stages of governance where priorities are established and resources are allocated. Exclusion from these processes effectively limits the capacity of CSOs to shape development outcomes.

Several participants described learning about projects only after implementation had already begun. One respondent explained:

“Hibabaro nala kami hito aada na, implement na.” [We are made aware only when the project has already been implemented.]

Another similarly noted:

“Basta proyekto na hit barangay, haros waray boses kami hito.” [When it comes to barangay projects, we rarely have a voice.]

From these, it is clear that CSOs often occupy a reactive rather than proactive position within governance processes. Instead of participating during planning and budgeting stages, they are informed after decisions have already been made. As a result, opportunities to influence outcomes become severely constrained or deprived of them.

This finding aligns with the observations of Atienza and Go (2023) who argue that despite institutional reforms promoting citizen participation, substantial gaps remain between formal participatory provisions and actual practice within local governance. Similarly, Mansuri and Rao (2013) caution that participatory institutions often fail to empower citizens when local power structures continue to control decision-making processes.

Subtheme C: Institutional Recognition Without Substantive Inclusion

Beyond exclusion from planning and budgeting, participants frequently described experiences of inadequate recognition. Several respondents reported that their organizations were formally accredited or recognized by government agencies yet remained marginalized within barangay governance processes.

One participant explicitly stated:

“Diri kami narerecognize ha barangay.” [We are not recognized in the barangay.]

Another respondent similarly lamented:

“Waray invitation. Waray information.” [No invitation. No information.]

Participants repeatedly associated exclusion with failures of recognition. Some organizations maintained active relationships with municipal agencies, national government programs, sectoral organizations, and even funding institutions but remained disconnected from governance processes at the barangay level. Others expressed frustration that despite their contributions to community development, they were rarely invited to meetings or consulted regarding local concerns.

The issue of recognition extends beyond administrative inclusion. Fraser (2000) argues that democratic participation requires both representation and recognition. Groups may be formally acknowledged yet remain marginalized if institutions fail to treat them as legitimate contributors to decision-making processes. The experiences of participants reflect this dilemma. Although CSOs are recognized within legal and policy frameworks, many continue to experience exclusion from meaningful governance engagement.

Several participants also expressed uncertainty regarding how they should respond when recognition was absent. One respondent asked:

“Kun diri kami ginrerecognize, kun diri kami gin aacknowledge, gintataken for granted kami, ano it am bubuhaton?” [If we are not recognized, if we are not acknowledged, we are taken for granted, what will we do?]

This statement highlights not only frustration but also uncertainty regarding the mechanisms available for asserting participation rights. The finding suggests that institutional recognition remains uneven and that many CSOs lack the resources or knowledge necessary to challenge exclusion effectively.

Subtheme D: Politics as a Gatekeeper of Participation

Another prominent finding concerns the influence of local political dynamics on participation opportunities. Across several FGDs, respondents suggested that participation was shaped not only by institutional arrangements but also by political relationships.

When asked about barriers to participation, one participant immediately responded:

“Pulitika.” [Politics]

Another respondent elaborated:

“Kun diri ka aligned with the punong barangay, diri ka matatagan hin kuan.” [If you are not politically aligned with the head of the barangay, you will not be given [support]]

Similarly, another participant explained:

“Makuri an mga farmers labi sugad ha akon nga presidente. An hadi nga administrasyon kay di ko kasundo an amon kapitan, waray talaga ako naachieve nga bulig nga tikang ha gobyerno.” [It’s hard for farmers especially for me as president. I was not in good terms with the previous administration, with our barangay head, so I do not receive any support coming from the government.]

These narratives suggest that access to participation may be influenced by political relationships and perceptions of alignment. Participants frequently associated support, recognition, and even access to opportunities for engagement with the disposition of local leaders toward particular organizations. The findings likewise support observations by Lorch (2020) who argues that civil society participation in local governance is often constrained by patronage networks and localized power relations. Even where participatory institutions formally exist, political dynamics may influence which organizations gain access to governance spaces and which remain marginalized.

Theme 4 - CSO Reimagination of Meaningful Participation

Theme 4 captures how participants reimagine what CSO participation has to be. Participants across the FGDs articulated clear visions of what meaningful participation should look like. While respondents acknowledged the existence of participatory mechanisms such as barangay assemblies, meetings, consultations, and community activities, they repeatedly emphasized that participation would become more meaningful if civil society organizations were provided with greater recognition, stronger institutional support, improved access to information, and opportunities for capacity development. These aspirations reveal that participants do not reject existing governance structures. Rather, they seek a more inclusive and enabling environment in which participation can move beyond attendance and consultation toward genuine engagement.

Subtheme A: Building Capacity for Meaningful Participation

Across the FGDs, a recurring finding was the perceived need for training and capability-building. Participants frequently acknowledged limitations in their understanding of governance processes, legal mandates, organizational responsibilities, and participatory mechanisms. Many respondents admitted that although they were aware of the existence of governance structures and legal provisions, they often lacked the knowledge necessary to engage these mechanisms effectively.

When asked about their familiarity with governance policies and regulations, several participants openly admitted limited knowledge:

“Diri talaga ak maaram it ak mga responsibilidad.” [I really do not know what my responsibilities are.]

Another respondent similarly explained:

“Maaram ha pahapyaw pero in full diri sayod.” [I slightly know about it but not in full.]

Participants from other FGDs echoed similar sentiments. One respondent admitted:

“Diri kami maaram sir.” [We do not know about it sir.]

Another stated:

“Nakalimutan ko na.” [I already forgot.]

The above-quoted statements reveal that many CSO representatives possess only partial awareness of governance structures and participatory rights. While respondents demonstrated familiarity with barangay assemblies and community activities, they frequently expressed uncertainty regarding technical processes such as planning, budgeting, accreditation, committee participation, and governance oversight.

The perceived lack of knowledge was accompanied by strong calls for training and education. Across multiple FGDs, participants consistently identified capacity-building as one of the most important interventions necessary to strengthen participation.

One participant emphasized:

“Training kinahanglan.” [We need trainings.]

Similarly, another respondent recommended:

“Seminars to improve their knowledge.” [Seminars to improve our knowledge]

Participants from earlier FGDs articulated similar requests:

“Kulang gud han training.” [There really is a lack of training.]

“Mas maupay kun may orientation pa gud.” [It is better if an orientation is conducted.]

The consistency of these responses across the dataset suggests that capacity-building is not merely an isolated concern but a widely shared aspiration among CSO representatives. Participants recognized that meaningful participation requires not only opportunities for engagement but also the knowledge and skills necessary to navigate governance processes effectively.

This finding aligns with the work of Cornwall (2008) who argues that participatory spaces alone are insufficient when citizens lack the resources and capacities necessary to engage them effectively. Similarly, Gaventa (2004) emphasizes that participation is shaped not only by institutional opportunities but also by citizens' ability to understand and utilize those opportunities. The experiences of Samar's CSO representatives suggest that strengthening governance literacy may be an essential prerequisite for deepening democratic participation.

Subtheme B: Recognition as a Foundation for Inclusion

Aside from capacity-building, participants repeatedly emphasized the need for stronger institutional recognition of CSOs. Throughout the discussions, respondents described situations in which organizations were active, accredited, and engaged in community development activities yet remained disconnected from governance processes.

Participants shared:

“Waray kami boses, diri man kami gintatagan invitation.” [We do not have a voice because we are invited.]

“Diri naiimbitahan, diri naiinform.” [We are not invited, not informed]

These narratives indicate that recognition extends beyond formal accreditation. For participants, meaningful

recognition involves being consistently informed, invited, consulted, and included in governance processes. Respondents repeatedly associated exclusion with the absence of communication and engagement rather than with formal legal barriers.

The findings resonate with Fraser's (2000) argument that democratic participation requires recognition alongside representation. Citizens and organizations may formally exist within governance structures but participation remains constrained when institutions fail to acknowledge them as legitimate actors. Participants' experiences suggest that recognition functions as a prerequisite for inclusion because organizations cannot participate meaningfully in processes from which they are excluded or uninformed.

More importantly, it is to be noted that participants did not demand preferential treatment or special privileges. Rather, they sought acknowledgment as legitimate stakeholders whose contributions and perspectives deserved consideration. Their calls for recognition therefore reflect broader aspirations for inclusion within governance rather than demands for organizational advantage.

Subtheme C: Participation as Partnership

Participants also envisioned participation as a collaborative relationship between CSOs and local government institutions. Several respondents expressed the desire to move beyond attendance-based participation toward more active involvement in planning, budgeting, implementation, monitoring and evaluation, and other governance activities.

One participant explained:

"Akon unta gusto maapi kami ha pagplano." [We want that we be included in planning.]

Another respondent noted:

"Mas maupay kun mahibaro kami antes pa magdesisyon." [It's better if we are made aware before any decision is arrived at.]

Similarly, participants frequently emphasized the importance of consultation occurring before decisions were finalized rather than after projects had already been approved.

One respondent observed:

"Hibabaro nala kami hito aada na, implement na." [We only get to know about it after it has been implemented.]

Another lamented:

"Waray pa ako hito makalingkod ha Barangay Development Council." [I have not yet been involved in the Barangay Development Council.]

These illustrate participants' desire for earlier and more substantive involvement in governance processes. Rather than simply receiving information regarding completed decisions, respondents wished to contribute during stages where priorities and policies were being formulated.

The findings support contemporary deliberative democratic scholarship which emphasizes that meaningful participation requires opportunities for citizens to engage in agenda-setting, deliberation, and collective decision-making (Bächtiger et al., 2018). Participation becomes more democratic when citizens contribute to shaping decisions rather than merely responding to them.

Subtheme D: Toward More Inclusive and Deliberative Governance

Despite acknowledging barriers, respondents consistently articulated constructive recommendations focused on collaboration rather than confrontation. They sought stronger partnerships with barangay officials, improved

communication mechanisms, greater access to information, and opportunities to strengthen organizational capacities.

From the perspective of Habermas' (1984, 1987) Theory of Communicative Action, these aspirations reflect a desire for governance arrangements grounded in mutual understanding, dialogue, and reciprocal engagement. Participants were not merely requesting access to governance spaces. They were advocating for governance relationships characterized by recognition, constant communication, and meaningful exchange. Likewise, deliberative democratic theory suggests that democratic legitimacy is strengthened when citizens are equipped with the capacities and opportunities necessary to participate effectively in collective decision-making (Dryzek, 2000).

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of the study, it can be concluded that while participatory mechanisms for CSO engagement in barangay governance are institutionally established, meaningful participation remains uneven and constrained. CSOs actively engage in assemblies, meetings, consultations, and community initiatives driven by both civic commitment and developmental aspirations. However, their involvement rarely extends to the planning, budgeting, and decision-making processes where governance outcomes are determined. Participants consistently described opportunities to voice concerns but limited influence over final decisions, reflecting persistent challenges related to institutional recognition, access to information, governance literacy, and local political dynamics. The study further concludes that the central challenge facing participatory governance is not the absence of spaces for participation but the limited capacity of those spaces to translate citizen voice into consequential influence, underscoring the need to strengthen CSOs as genuine partners in local governance and development.

The need to strengthen participatory governance by institutionalizing the meaningful involvement of accredited CSOs across planning, budgeting, implementation, and monitoring processes is evident, ensuring that citizen perspectives are reflected in local governance decisions. Enhancing information dissemination, establishing more consistent engagement and feedback mechanisms, and providing regular capacity-building opportunities for CSO representatives may further improve the quality and effectiveness of participation. While the study provides important insights into the experiences of CSO representatives in barangay governance, its findings reflect the perspectives of civil society actors alone. Future studies may incorporate the views of barangay officials, local government representatives, and community members to develop a more comprehensive understanding of participatory governance processes. Comparative studies across municipalities and provinces may likewise help identify contextual factors that shape participation in different governance settings. In addition, mixed-method approaches may further enrich the evidence base by combining qualitative accounts of participation with quantitative assessments of governance outcomes and citizen engagement.

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