

## Empowering Grassroots Voices: Engagement of Civil Society Organizations in Philippine Local Governance

Rona Celeste V. Pasamonte\*

### Abstract

Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) promote inclusive governance characterized by accountability, transparency, and participation. The engagement of CSOs' is a mechanism for citizens and government to work together to achieve development. The study used mixed methods to examine CSOs' engagement in local governance in the four functional areas of planning, budgeting, implementation monitoring, and evaluation within the Province of Bukidnon, Philippines. The results show a moderate level of engagement, with planning having the highest and monitoring and evaluation the lowest. The study reveals a discrepancy between policy and practice, implying compliance may be a stronger motivator than genuine engagement. Furthermore, specific CSO attributes like geographical location, sectors represented, organizational level and number of committees represented significantly affected their level of engagement. This study emphasizes the importance of strengthening systems that empower grassroots voices and foster meaningful collaboration, between civil society groups and local government.

**Keywords:** Empowering grassroots voices, engagement, civil society organizations, Philippine local governance

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\* College of Public Administration and Governance, Bukidnon State University, Malaybalay, Bukidnon, Philippines

E-mail: ronacestespasamonte@buksu.edu.ph

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## Introduction

In recent years, the involvement of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in local governance has increased tremendously. CSOs play a pivotal role in empowering citizens and promoting effective governance. They serve as a bridge that connects the citizens and the government through organized public forums where residents can express their issues and concerns (Gouthro, 2002). CSOs go beyond just providing a platform; they inspire and empower grassroots communities by equipping them with the resources to advocate for change. Furthermore, CSOs can also increase the reach of the government by providing essential services in remote and underserved communities to contribute to improved governance through policy advocacy and government performance monitoring. The connection between CSOs and communities has made them effective partners in bringing people together to achieve a common development agenda and mobilize support for more efficient programs and projects.

Moreover, the CSOs have held government officials accountable by performing watchdog efforts (Williamson & Rodd, 2016). The citizens' role involves the simple electoral and participatory processes, a tool that reconfigures democracy through acts that express individual will. Citizen participation influences how governments make decisions and assume political power (Ruvalcaba-Gomez, 2019). CSOs participate through shared interactions and voluntary assistance.

According to the United Nations, a CSO is any non-profit, voluntary citizens' group which is organized on a local, national, or international level. They performed a variety of services and humanitarian functions, bring citizens' concerns to Governments, monitor policies, and encourage political participation at the community level. In the local government context, CSOs provide immediate responses alongside the government such as disaster management, peace and order, health, and other local issues.

## The Philippine Context

The 2013 Asian Development Bank Publication characterized the CSOs from the Filipino concepts of *pakikipagkapwa* (holistic interaction with others) and *kapwa* (shared inner self). Voluntary assistance or charity connotes equal status between the provider of the aid and the recipient for Filipinos, which embodies the terms *damayan* (the help of peers in periods of crisis) and *pagtutulungan* (mutual self-help) and the Western notion of *kawang gawa* (charity).

The 1987 Philippine Constitution, Republic Act 7160 – Local Government Code, Department of Interior and the Local Government (DILG) issuances, and other mandates of the government allowed the growth and participation of CSOs in nation-building. They have turned out to be effective partners who work with national, regional, and local administrative units when it comes to different programs and making decisions. They usually work together with the Local Government Units -(LGUs) – on various devolved functions such as setting local development agenda. The government engages in participatory governance with primary types of CSOs such as people's organizations (POs), non-governmental organizations (NGOs), civic organizations, cooperatives, social movements, professional groups, and business groups. The LGUs in Bukidnon Philippines, accredit CSOs, and allow them to engage in local committees like health, peace and order, education, and local development. This collaboration strengthens policy formulation, service delivery, and overall governance.

The CSOs are assigned to different local special bodies (LSB), committees, or councils in Bukidnon, where they perform varied functions and sets of deliverables. These include Provincial Development Council, Local Finance Committee, Public Financial Management Assessment Team, Bukidnon Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict, Provincial Land Use Committee, Provincial Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council, Provincial Statistics Committee, Provincial Anti-Drug Abuse Council, Provincial Peace and Order Council, and Provincial Health Board. By acting as representatives for the community, CSOs significantly impact the lives of Bukidnon residents.

### **Framework of the Study**

This study builds on the concept of Collaborative Governance (Ansell & Gash, 2008) to examine how CSOs and local governments can work together in a formalized and deliberative manner for more effective decision-making. Habermas' (1981) Critical theory of Communicative Action provides a foundation for this collaboration by emphasizing the importance of dialogue between the local government and civil society. Hamzaj (2015) and Bolton (2005). Communicative provides the primary justification for enhancing the participation of CSOs in local governance as citizen representatives and government partners, especially those provided with the means to empower grassroots voices. Critical theory is a social theory that aims to critique and change society and Habermas' view of everyday communicative action opposes models of social order that consider interactions between strategically acting subjects fundamental. This theory provides a forum for communicative forms of action and the

development of active citizenship (Gouthro, 2002). Habermas explored how the renewal of CSOs may help foster communicative action.

The idea of government and civil society coming together to achieve development is aligned with the collaborative governance theory. Ansell and Gash (2008, p.544) define collaborative governance as “a governing arrangement where one or more public agencies directly engage non-state stakeholders in a collective decision-making process that is formal, consensus-oriented, and deliberative and that aims to make or implement public policy or manage public programs or assets”. The Philippine government supports this concept, several issuances were released to formalize civil society engagement in local government decisions. The same study reviewed 137 cases of collaborative governance across a range of policy sectors, that identified critical variables that will influence whether or not this mode of governance will produce successful collaboration. These variables include the prior history of conflict or cooperation, the incentives for stakeholders to participate, and power and resource imbalances among others. It also identified a series of factors that are crucial within the collaborative process itself. It found that a virtuous cycle of collaboration tends to develop when collaborative forums focus on “small wins” that deepen trust, commitment, and shared understanding. This makes sense because both the government and civil society need to build a solid relationship to attain collaborative decision-making.

CSOs provide an alternative means of representation and a way to move beyond the existing system. It stands apart from government and economic organizations within the marketplace. In light of the issues confronting the world today, collective efforts in all aspects of society are a must and should serve as a weapon against all forms of threats (social, economic, political, and environmental, among others) toward continuous development and harmony. Social movements in the past motivated the promotion of participatory democracy, and their ongoing participation indicates that democratic ideals are evolving and very much working today (Orbista, 2012). Similarly, as participatory democracy provides the overarching framework for citizens' involvement in governance, Emerson and Nabatchi (2015) collaborative governance offers a more specific approach to achieving participatory ideals through structures of collaboration and diverse stakeholders.

CSOs can be a powerful force in strengthening responsive governing institutions and practices, demanding more accountability, transparency, participation, effective governance, the democratization

of development cooperation, and the quality and relevance of official development programs. Development is driven by democratic participation, given that, when governance fails to perform well, it impedes economic development; hence, “bad governance tends to make worse off the poor in the community and strengthens poverty among the most deprived.” At the onset of malfunctioning of institutions, social members who are at greater risk in terms of their welfare are usually the first casualties. Therefore, in enhancing human development, more and more attention and effort are directed towards the effectiveness and timeliness of governance processes, as well as those of public entities. However, the study by Purdy (2012) argues that existing power imbalances within collaborative governance structures can limit the effectiveness of these processes, particularly for marginalized communities. This acknowledges the potential limitations of CSO involvement and emphasizes the need to address power imbalances for truly equitable development.

Considering different lenses is important for inclusive decision-making, especially within government. This study focuses on the 23 CSOs in Bukidnon Province, Philippines. These groups represent varied advocacies reflecting the province's rich cultural background including Indigenous People, women, youth, and persons with disabilities.

The theory of Habermas is also supported by the concept of Participatory Governance as stated in the 2030 United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) which revitalizes the global partnership for sustainable development. This is a call to all countries around the world to unite and make sure that everyone is included in the process. Hence, governments, private sectors, civil societies, and indeed every human being have a part to play. The realization of the SDG depends on putting more effort into international partnership and cooperation.

Moreover, participatory governance is the key feature of the Open Government Partnership (OGP). OGP is based on the idea that an open government is more accessible, more responsive, and more accountable to citizens and that improving the relationship between people and their government has long-term benefits for everyone. It is supported by the Philippine Government through (PDP) 2023 – 2028 outcomes, in deepening participatory governance. The outcomes not only mean establishing functional participatory platforms that inform or consult citizens but also ensuring that citizens and CSOs have concrete roles and significant influence in all stages of public decision-making.

### **CSO Attributes, Functional Areas and Actors**

CSO attributes include the CSOs' organizational level, CSOs' sectors represented, CSOs' number of committee representation, size of CSOs, CSOs' geographical location and CSOs' period of existence. CSO attributes are considered to be CSOs characteristics and significantly align with their advocacy. CSOs submit their application for accreditation to represent LSB, committees and council. Thereafter, the concerned LGU proceeds with scrutinizing their documents to identify their organizational level, sectors represented, LSB committees and councils to present and the number of committee presentations. CSO geographical presentation, size of CSOs and period of existence are the distinct features of a CSO, that serve as the basis in the selection of LSB, committees and councils. All six attributes are based on the profile of each CSOs, thus an attribute of one CSO is not the same attribute with another CSO. This means that the CSOs in Bukidnon are diverse. The diversity of CSOs represents the varied advocacies and communities they serve.

The functional areas where CSOs engage include planning and investment programming, budgeting, implementation and monitoring and evaluation. DILG MC 2021-054, through the CSO desk, encourages the active participation of CSOs in all local governance processes from planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluation through the spirit of volunteerism. The actors in the study are considered the perception of CSOs and LGUs. It is vital to capture CSOs' perceptions towards their engagement. It is equally important to include how LGUs also perceive CSOs' engagement in local governance.

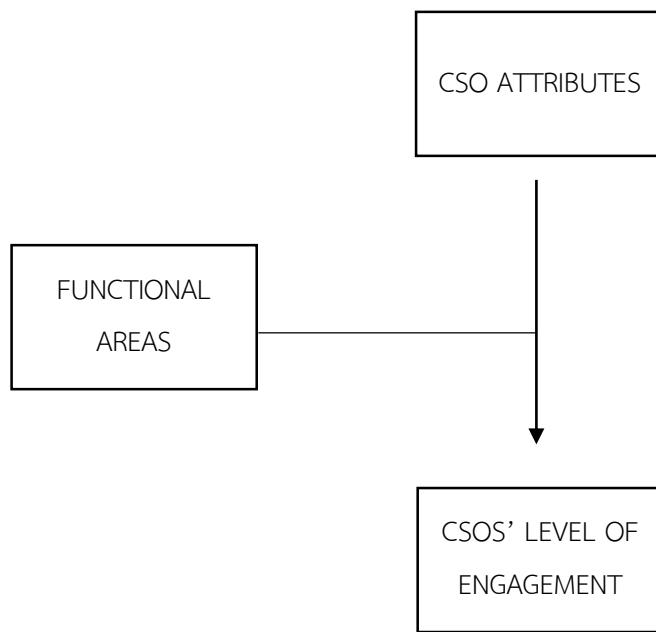
### **The Gap between Policy and Actual Practice**

While legal frameworks promote CSO engagement, research reveals a disconnect between policy and actual implementation. CSOs and other stakeholders point to a lack of translation of these legal frameworks into meaningful participation. (OGP, 2019). Orbista (2012) further elucidated the difficulty in measuring the impact of collaborative programs, projects, and activities between non-government organizations. Similarly, the Seaoil Foundation (n.d.) presents the limitations of CSOs' capacity, resources, and government support as the reason for poor CSO engagement. Moreover, research in the past has mostly concentrated on whether or not programs are successful in getting CSOs to participate, often by considering only those designed by the government.

The Assessment and Challenges of the PDP of 2023–2028, emphasized the need to improve CSOs' representation in the LSBs, committees, and councils. Only about 50 percent of barangays have CSO representation in the barangay development councils. Moreover, only 14,000 barangay-based NGOs were accredited. Some LGUs have not fully implemented DILG issuance in creating their CSO desks and people's councils as mechanisms to encourage more community participation in local governance. The LGUs also pointed out that some CSOs still need to be capacitated to fully engage in the committees. Although DILG and LGU provide seminar-workshops and training, they recognize the need for continuous capacity building for CSOs to be updated with the recent changes in government matters. In the committees' decision-making processes only a few CSOs' suggestions and opinions were considered. To adhere to the law requirement, the committees ensured that the CSOs attended meetings and conferences; however, more is needed to guarantee their meaningful participation. In the same PDP 2023-2028, deepening participatory governance means establishing functional participatory platforms that inform or consult citizens and ensure that citizens and CSOs have concrete roles and significant influence in all stages of public decision-making.

### **Objectives**

This study aims to fill the gap by examining the breadth and meaningfulness of CSO engagement in local governance across four functional areas: planning, budgeting, implementation, and monitoring & evaluation. Furthermore, the research explored how specific CSO attributes (organizational level, sector represented, number of committees represented, size, geographical location, and period of existence of CSOs) influence their engagement levels. By understanding these factors, the research shed light on how to maximize the meaningful contribution of CSOs to local decision-making and empower grassroots voices in Philippine governance.



**Figure 1.** Schematic Diagram of the Study

### Null Hypotheses

- H01: CSOs' organizational level does not significantly affect CSOs' level of engagement;
- H02: CSOs' sectors represented do not significantly affect CSOs' level of engagement;
- H03: CSOs' number of committees represented does not significantly affect CSOs' level of engagement;
- H04: The size of CSOs does not significantly affect CSOs' level of engagement;
- H05: CSOs' geographical location does not significantly affect CSOs' level of engagement; and,
- H06: CSOs' period of existence does not significantly affect CSOs' level of engagement.

### Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods research design to examine the level of engagement of CSOs in local governance within Bukidnon, Philippines. A researcher-developed questionnaire was administered to a total sample of 165 respondents. This sample comprised 145 CSO members and 20 local government employees and officials selected through simple random sampling. A 5-point Likert Scale was used in the research questions to gauge the level of CSO engagement across four functional areas: planning, budgeting, implementation, and monitoring within ten LSBs, committees, and councils.

Key informant interviews with purposefully selected participants from both CSOs and LGUs (n=10) provided qualitative insights. Descriptive statistics analyzed engagement levels, while regression analysis explored how CSO attributes influence engagement. Finally, ANOVA will compare engagement across the four functional areas.

## Results and Discussion

As presented in Table 1, both CSOs and LGUs perceive the overall level of CSO engagement in local governance across ten LSBs, committees, and councils to be only moderate, encompassing planning, budgeting, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation. This suggests that CSO participation and contribution to program results and sustainability have been somewhat limited. There might be a gap between what is written in legal provisions and established goals, and what is happening in practice.

The comments and suggestions provided by CSOs are only taken into account on some occasions while making the committee's final decisions. CSO engagement has become increasingly neutral. Discouraged by limited influence, they conform to LGU-led decisions in meetings. Unclear legal guidelines regarding the depth and breadth of CSO engagement restrict LGUs' attempts to involve them, despite their efforts. The survey confirms this power imbalance, with CSOs reporting minimal control over final decisions.

The PDP of 2023-2028 stipulates that the quality of participation is improved when it is free from cooptation and tokenism and conducted not for mere compliance with policy guidelines. As part of the aim to deepen participatory governance, the plan states that the government agencies, with the Philippine open government partner agencies, will mainstream the implementation of Participatory Governance Metrics for assessing the quality of participation in LSBs and national programs. The government will also strengthen the Council on Good Local Governance and intensify capacity development interventions for CSO members of LSBs. It will continue to implement collaborative practices with CSOs in developing, implementing, and monitoring government programs; and will strengthen the capacity of national and local CSOs to engage the government effectively.

**Table 1.** CSOs' Level of Engagement in Local Governance

CSOs' engagement	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Overall	3.17	0.39	Moderately Engaged
Local Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict	4.02	1.18	Engaged
Provincial Disaster Risk Reduction Management Council	3.90	1.00	Engaged
Provincial Peace and Order Council	3.80	1.10	Engaged
Provincial Project and Monitoring Committee	3.30	0.88	Moderately Engaged
Provincial Anti-Drug Abuse Council	3.08	1.79	Moderately Engaged
Provincial Health Board	2.86	1.05	Moderately Engaged
Provincial Land Use Council	2.82	1.48	Moderately Engaged
Provincial Development Council	2.77	1.17	Moderately Engaged
Public Financial Management Assessment Team	2.70	0.70	Moderately Engaged
Provincial Statistics Committee	2.46	0.38	Fairly Engaged

5-Highly Engaged, 4-Engaged, 3-Moderately Engaged, 2-Fairly Engaged, 1-Not Engaged.

In terms of the ten LSBs, committees, and councils, the Local Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict was rated as mostly engaged. This implies that the CSOs are more engaged in local initiatives to support the end of armed conflict. This is acceptable because the CSOs, like other ordinary citizens, believe that peace and environmental security are at the core of community development. Without armed conflict in the community, lasting peace can be achieved. The CSOs, as community leaders, are initiating activities to safeguard the welfare of the vulnerable groups in the community by discouraging them from joining any armed conflict.

For CSOs, a safe and peaceful community is the foundation for everything else. They see ongoing conflict as a major hurdle to development and want to create a secure environment for everyone. CSOs can be valuable partners for the government because they're "on the ground" and can help identify insurgent groups. The police need to have this information to keep the peace. In the absence of peace, providing education, jobs, and even support for CSOs becomes a lot more difficult. Collaboration between the government, the public, and the CSOs is the key to attaining sustainable peace and a thriving community.

While the CSOs were less engaged in the Provincial Statistics Committee (PSC) as compared to other committees. This might have been largely attributed to the amount of workload. CSOs' representing the PSC had more tasks and deliverables than they could handle, because of constrained manpower and financial resources. Consequently, this has limited their full participation in it. On the other hand, the lengthy and time-consuming process is the primary reason why CSOs are discouraged from applying for accreditation. These challenges make it harder for the PSC to have strong CSO involvement.

DILG MC 2019 – 72 stipulates the process and guidelines for CSOs' accreditation. The preparation for accreditation begins in July to September, the first-year term until the end of the term of the Governor and Mayor. The major activities include posting of inventory schedule and existing directory of CSOs, the conduct of inventory, posting of draft directory and verification of CSOs information, posting of the final updated directory of CSOs, call for accreditation, the conduct of CSO conference, accreditation proper, selection to the LSB, and reconstitution and convening of LSB. The 3-month process requires CSOs to go back and forth to the Provincial office for compliance. This is one of the reasons for CSOs' lack of motivation to be accredited. Moreover, the tedious process is simultaneously complied with by CSOs in their respective municipalities or cities.

This result further resonates with the established challenges identified in collaborative governance research (Ansell & Gash, 2008), particularly regarding time constraints. As noted in the studies of (Gunton & Day, 2003; Imperial, 2005) building consensus and trust takes time, which can be a barrier when stakeholders are burdened by heavy workloads. Moreover, this suggests that streamlining the CSO accreditation process and potentially re-evaluating the workload distribution within the PSC could be

crucial steps toward fostering greater CSO engagement and in the long run creating a productive collaborative environment.

Table two reveals a significant difference in CSOs' level of engagement among the functional areas of planning, budgeting, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. It further shows that planning has the highest level of engagement, followed by implementation, budgeting, and monitoring and evaluation. This high level of participation in planning reflects the advantages CSOs bring to local governance. Their presence in committees ensures diverse voices, including those of the public, are represented. CSOs can lobby for proposals and advocate for their priorities to be included in the plans. During this stage, they can extensively integrate their expertise and perspectives. Open discussions allow them to debate priorities and challenge existing ideas. Their knowledge and experience can be vital for generating support for specific issues and framing effective policy narratives. Some international CSOs even function as government think tanks, providing valuable insights and innovative solutions. Collaboration between CSOs and the government is crucial for achieving national and international development goals.

**Table 2.** Analysis of Variance on CSOs' Level of Engagement Concerning the Functional Areas

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	7.804	3	2.601	3.187	.025
Within Groups	137.945	169	.816		
Total	145.748	172			

\*significant at 0.05

#### Descriptives

	N	Mean	SD	Std. Error
Planning	47	<b>3.46</b>	0.72	.105
Implementation	50	3.04	1.02	.145
Budgeting	37	2.99	1.01	.166
Monitoring and evaluation	39	<b>2.93</b>	0.83	.070

However, LGUs noted a potential red flag to this high level of enthusiasm. While CSOs actively participated in planning discussions, their focus appeared primarily on securing funding for their own projects. This suggests that CSO engagement may be heavily influenced by budget allocation decisions.

Meanwhile, monitoring and evaluation got the *lowest* mean which indicates that CSOs are less likely engaged in the monitoring and evaluation stage. This could be attributed to the lack of clear guidelines and procedures for monitoring and evaluation. Additionally, it is crucial to contextualize and localize the concerns of CSOs in terms of the monitoring and evaluation structure to ensure their effective engagement. Therefore, CSOs are currently facing hurdles in engaging in the monitoring and evaluation process. During the monitoring and evaluation, CSOs are expected to join the feedback mechanism of the different programs and projects implemented by the government (DILG MC No. 2018-89) (Supreme Court of the Philippines, 2018). However, on some occasions, CSOs are misunderstood whenever they give feedback to the local government. This has led to confusion and hindered the effectiveness of the feedback mechanism. Due to the lack of clear legal provisions and guidelines on the extent to which CSOs can engage in monitoring and evaluation. More so, existing guidelines need to specify precisely which committees and councils CSOs will engage with in each LSB. On the other hand, CSOs have observed that LGUs rarely initiate efforts to involve them in monitoring and evaluation processes.

Many CSOs face a critical hurdle in connecting with their communities, this includes a lack of proper training. The CSOs understood how important it was to improve competencies; however, their full schedules and lack of capacity-building programs made it difficult. Unclear guidelines surrounding mandatory involvement further discourage CSO participation. To bridge this gap and foster stronger community engagement, allocating a budget for comprehensive training programs for CSOs is essential.

Multi-stakeholder feedback is an essential element of monitoring and evaluation. The CSO, acting as a critique of the government is part and parcel of determining the status of the implementation, identifying problems, and, identifying solutions to the problems. This act of the CSOs is acknowledged and positively recognized by the government. Executive Order 93 (1993), series of 1993 was issued to establish the Regional Project Monitoring and Evaluation System (RPMES) to facilitate the project implementation, monitoring, and evaluation at the regional and sub-regional levels. It provides a scheme

for the monitoring and evaluation of projects with the participation of the government at all levels and NGOs.

Table three reveals that the null hypothesis in terms of CSOs' organizational level, sectors represented, geographical location, and number of the committees represented are rejected, implying that they have significantly affected their level of engagement. On the other hand, the size of CSOs and CSOs' period of existence are accepted, which means that there is no significant effect on their level of engagement.

**Table 3:** Regression Analysis of the CSOs' Level of Engagement among CSO Attributes

Model	Coefficients <sup>a</sup>					
	Unstandardized		Standardized		T	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Coefficients	Beta		
Constant	1.232	.591			2.082	.040
CSOs Organization Level (Barangay)	.309	.336	.091	.091	.919	.360
CSOs Organization Level (Municipality/City)	.696	.269	.251	.251	2.582	.011
CSOs Sector Represented (Cooperative)	-.527	.612	-.094	-.094	-.861	.391
CSOs Sector Represented (Civic Organizations)	2.016	.504	.494	.494	4.002	.000
CSOs Sector Represented (NGO)	.319	.309	.106	.106	1.032	.304
CSOs Geographic Location	.010	.005	.212	.212	2.225	.028
CSOs Number of Committees Represented	.846	.272	.376	.376	3.114	.002
CSOs size	-9.311E-006	.000	-.104	-.104	-1.014	.313
CSOs Period Existence	.007	.015	.051	.051	.463	.644

a. Dependent Variable: level of engagement

$R = .664$

$R^2 = .441$

*Adjusted R<sup>2</sup> = .390*

As to the organizational level, representatives from the municipality positively affect the CSOs' level of engagement. This means that the high level of engagement is due to the large number of CSOs engaged in the municipality. CSOs accredited in the province, municipality, or city have experienced several opportunities to participate in government activities. According to the LGU, upon the validation of their application for accreditation, CSOs with a limited scope, are encouraged to apply in the city or municipality where their organization may also serve. This is to allow CSOs to have a concrete opportunity for engagement in the government. The government ensures that all CSOs at all levels of the LGU are represented and included as members of the LSB, committees, or councils. Hence, for the

issuance of DILG MC 2021-054, all LGUs must establish their respective CSO Desk and institutionalize the Peoples' Council in every province, city, and municipality.

Moreover, the CSOs' sectors represented are also significant to the CSOs' level of engagement. Civic organizations have a direct effect on the CSOs' level of engagement. This means that the more CSOs representing civic organizations the higher their level of engagement. CSOs aim to collaborate with the government and are not against any decisions and plans made by the LGU. They express their full support for the agenda of the LSB they represent. The CSOs have a positive outlook toward their engagement in government affairs. They even stated that they only partially rely on the government's financial support to implement their programs, projects, and activities. The CSO can make things work through their own generated money. As experienced by LGU, the CSOs representing civic organizations have been reaccredited for several accreditation periods. With this, the CSOs have become familiar with the norms of the LGU. As a result, the CSOs understand the committee's culture, thus disagreement and conflict are avoided.

The geographical location positively relates to the CSOs' level of engagement. The CSOs located in distant places are more engaged compared to the CSOs located in a nearby municipality towards their level of engagement. With this, CSOs whose offices are located outside of the city make sure to maximize their time and effort. They use their presence while in the city to be involved in meetings, deliberations, and decision-making. Based on the LGUs' observation, CSOs who travel for hours to attend meetings, submit reports, or inquire for updates reflect their willingness and commitment to engage in LGU matters. It is evident in the result that distance is not a hindrance for the CSOs to engage in the LGU actively. It even motivates them to show they are true to their advocacy. It is highlighted in the study conducted by Yasay (2018), that even if there were cases when access to information from LGUs became arduous, this strengthened the resolve and commitment of CSOs to engage and support the LGUs in the advocacy for good governance. CSOs have already accepted the responsibility to be partners of the government the moment they submit their organizations for accreditation. Moreover, the study also shared those good intentions such as engagement, transparency, and commitment can only pave the way for sustainable development; there ought to be a standard drive among the agents of change that impels them to keep their community's best interests at heart.

On the CSOs' number of committees represented, the result implies that CSOs with more committee representations have a higher engagement level than those with fewer ones. This can be explained by several factors. Firstly, accepting more than one committee makes them feel that they are needed; that they are essential. Second, CSOs believed that they had more likelihood of influencing policies at the local level. Lastly, it served as a motivation to maintain their representations in the committee and gain additional ones in future accreditations that could incentivize high performance. Hence, there were some challenges concerning the above circumstances. For one, multiple representations can make it difficult for even highly engaged CSOs to fulfill all their assigned roles effectively. In contrast, DILG MC 2019-72 states that in no case shall an organization or a representative be a member of more than one LSB within a province, city, or municipality. The ongoing issue is to reconcile these provisions with only a few active CSOs. Despite having increased every three years, the growth of accredited CSOs has not reached a level where all LSBs, committees, and councils in local government are adequately staffed.

Meanwhile, the size and period of existence of CSOs do not have a significant effect on their level of engagement. The study suggests that these factors do not influence their engagement. CSOs, despite the challenges they face, remain committed to their advocacy in extending the reach of the government to the community. They have consistently supported the local government by serving as collaborators and watchdogs at the same time. The size of CSOs also does not influence their level of involvement, as the government only gives limited seats for CSOs to represent in the LSBs, council, and committee meetings. Large CSOs find it difficult to disseminate information to all their members promptly, and convening all members in one setting is a significant challenge. Therefore, CSOs prefer quantity over quality, as this enables more members to engage directly with the government. According to a study by Clayton et al. (2000), the CSO sector's growth in size has not improved its independence, which compromises its capacity to provide an alternative development agenda for donors and governments.

Another challenge faced by CSOs is the lack of clear guidelines for evaluating their level of engagement in the local government. In the absence of well-established directives, problems could arise in the renewal of accreditation, determining eligibility criteria, or when being represented by LSBs, committees, or councils. Lack of clear direction makes it hard for CSOs to understand the obligations placed on them or ways they can indicate their commitment thus causing misunderstandings that might

damage their ability to effectively present their views in councils or contribute adequately in key decision-making forums. Despite that, it does not seem to affect the ability of CSOs to engage in committees they represent.

While the guidelines do not specify any eligibility requirements, the LGUs in Bukidnon have observed that CSOs are still well-represented in terms of size and period of existence. The power to make decisions is vested in and exercised by the people, either directly or indirectly through representation. To ensure that interested CSOs are accredited, the LGUs have widely disseminated calls for applications. This has resulted in an increase in the number of CSOs and private sectors in Bukidnon from 12 in 2016 to 33 in 2019, according to the Report of the Provincial Government of Bukidnon. It is believed that CSOs can influence the decision-making process of the local government to prioritize the needs and priorities of citizens. Therefore, they can provide new and holistic ways to ensure participatory local governance. (Rosilawati, 2018).

#### **Analysis of Gaps in CSO Engagement in Bukidnon, Philippines Local Governance**

Figure 2 depicts the Logic Model-based framework representation of the gap in the engagement of CSOs in local governance. Logic models were first described by Wholey (1983), and McLaughlin and Jordan (1999) summarize the early evolution and use. The Logic Model approach has been called a logical framework. Guce and Galindes (2017) emphasized that citizen participation allows private individuals to influence public decisions (Michels, 2011). Moreover, the concepts of citizens, opportunity, and influence are similarly illustrated.

The engagement of CSOs in local governance is limited only to what is provided in the Philippine Legal provisions. Most of this engagement dwells on the accreditation and selection of CSOs in LSB, committees, and councils. These activities are done through invitation of meetings, conferences, and sessions.

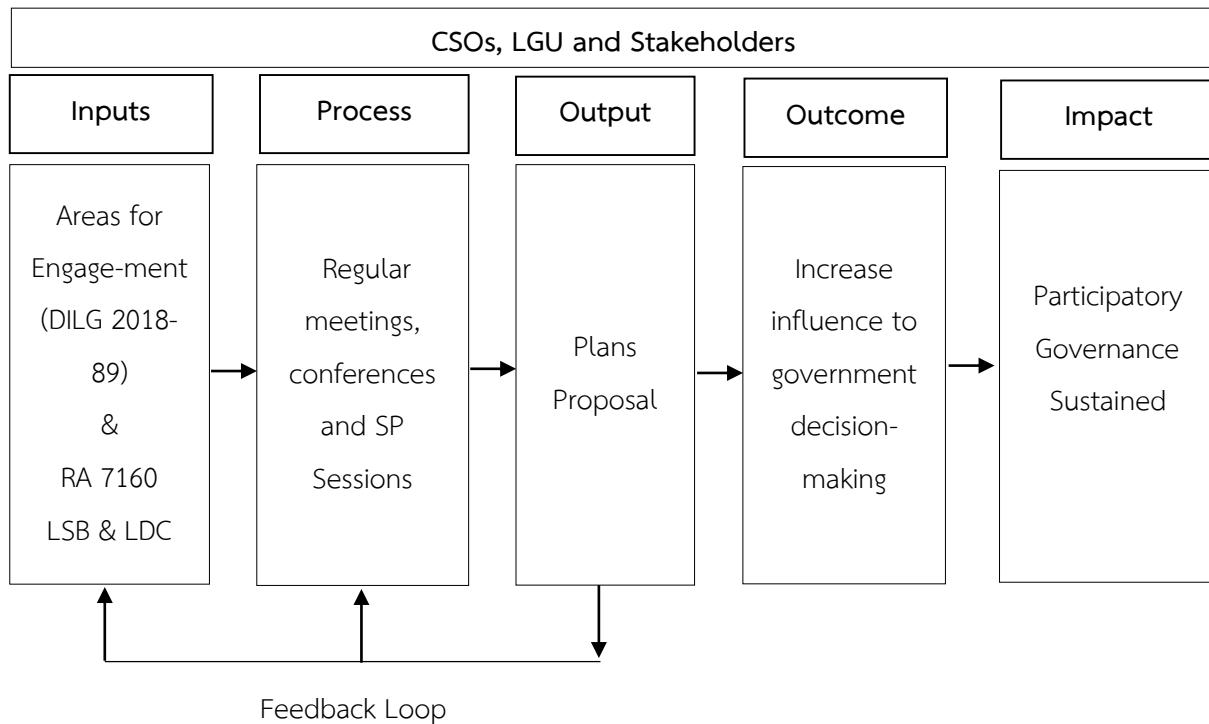
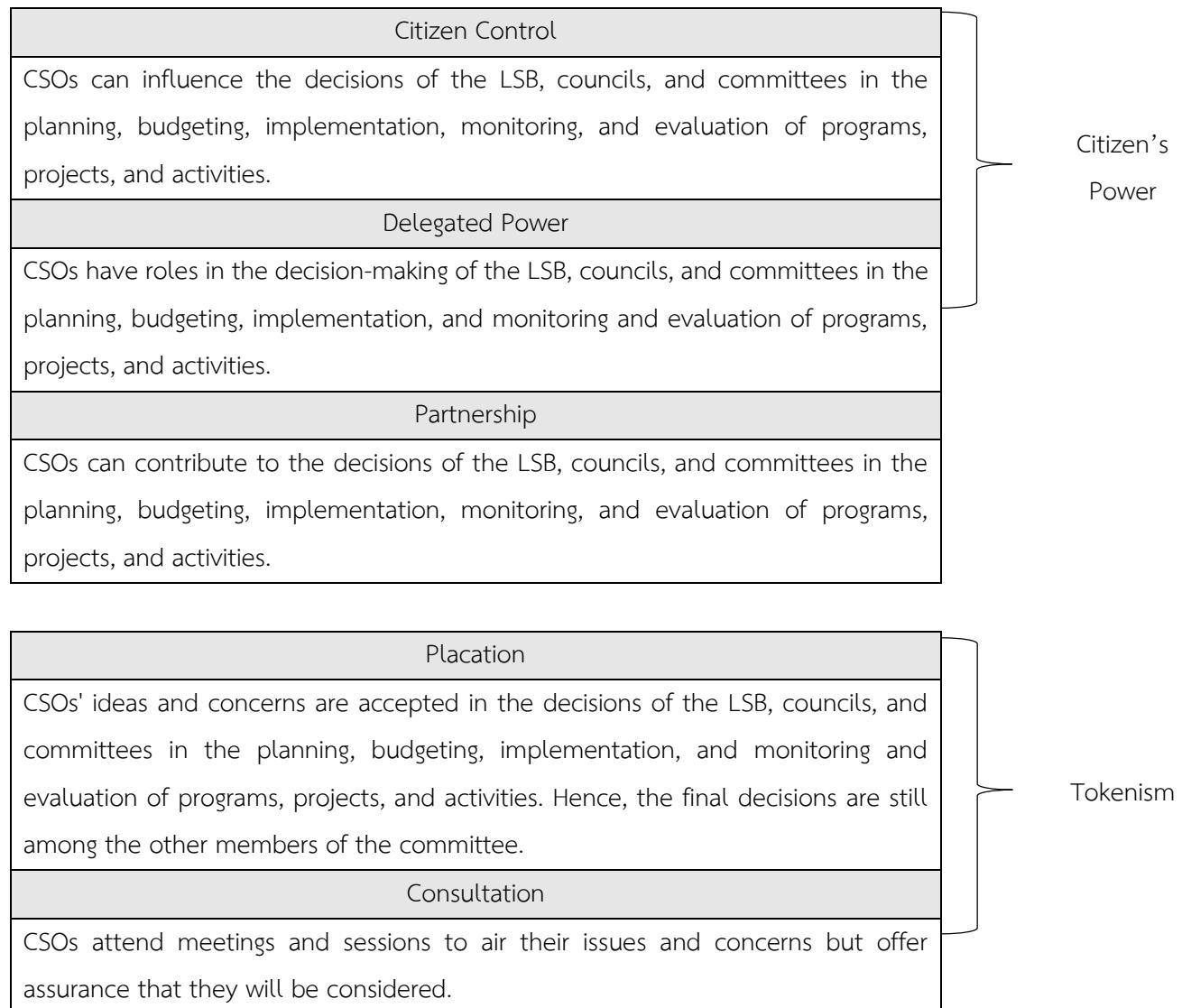


Figure 2. Logic Model-based Framework Representation of the Gap in CSOs' Engagement in Local Governance.

As can be gleaned in Figure 2, the input is considered the Functional Areas, the process is the call for regular meetings, and the output would be the plans and proposals which are part of the feedback loop. Moreover, it is the process that "loops" the outputs of a system back into the inputs. This depicts that the input, process, and outputs are subject to a loop through a feedback system. The feedback will help improve the system by providing the problems and areas that need improvement. The loop shall continue unless the problems are addressed. Further, it is the responsibility of the LGU to promote and establish CSOs to become active partners in pursuit of local autonomy. (RA 7160). The local government is in charge of creating initiatives for CSOs to be involved in the decision-making and plans. It is stipulated in the provision that the LGU shall promote meaningful citizen participation at all times. The establishment of the CSO Desk and Peoples Council through DILG issuance was supposed to reinforce the vagueness of the previous legal mandates. The circular highlighted that the participation of CSO in government processes is essential for providing checks and balances and exacting accountability. An indicator of healthy participatory governance is active CSO participation.

Figure 3 shows the modified Ladder of citizen Participation among CSOs in the LSB, committees, and councils of the LGU, adopted from the Arnsteins Ladder of Participation (1969), cited in the study of Gaber (2019). This is one of the most widely influential and referenced models in democratic public

participation. The typology of citizen participation is presented as a metaphorical ladder. Each ladder ascends and represents increasing citizen agency, control, and power levels. Arnstein provides a descriptive continuum of participatory power. The movement is from the *nonparticipation* (no power) to *degrees of tokenism* (counterfeit power), then to *degrees of citizen participation* (actual power).



**Figure 3.** Modified Ladder of Citizen Participation among CSOs in the LSB, Committees and Councils of the LGU, adopted from Arnsteins Ladder of Participation.

Informing	 Non-participation
CSOs are informed of the prior decision made by the other member of the committee without giving feedback from them.	
Therapy	
CSOs are encouraged to engage in the decision-making of the LSB, committees, and councils to exercise participatory governance, but no clear opportunities and platforms are provided.	
Manipulation	
CSOs are informed that the agreed decisions of the other members of the LSB, committees, and councils are final and cannot be changed at any cost.	

**Figure 4.** Modified Ladder of Citizen Participation among CSOs in the LSB, Committees and Councils of the LGU, adopted from Arnsteins Ladder of Participation (Continued).

The model depicts the relationship among power, community, and government in the aspect of increasing access or influence to decision-making. It is believed that the attainment of power is through effective citizen-government collaboration. There is no citizen participation for Levels one to two for it only aims to cure or educate. Tokenistic participation is from levels three to five. The first step to legitimate participation is Level Three (Informing), but there is only one way to flow information (from the government to citizens).

Level Four is on *Consultation*, which is the legitimate and usually a window-dressing ritual. The co-option of hand-picked worthies onto committees is Level Five which is on *Placation*. This level allows citizens to advise or plan *ad infinitum*. Also, it retains power holders the right to judge the feasibility or legitimacy of the advice (Dobson, n.d.). For Levels six to eight which are Arnstein's highest levels, argue that there are degrees of citizen control. Level Six on *Partnership* is when power is redistributed through negotiation between citizens and power holders, usually through shared decision-making platforms (e.g., joint committees). Level Seven on *Delegation* is when citizens hold a clear majority of committee seats with delegated powers to make decisions. Finally, Level Eight which is on *Citizen Control*, the highest level, is when the entire set of functions of planning, policymaking, and managing programs is done by citizens without an intermediary between them and the fund source (Guce & Galindes, 2017).

As illustrated in the analysis of this research, the CSO engagement in the local government is only within the level of tokenism. At this level, citizens are allowed to be heard, provided that they have more power to ensure that their views will be heeded by the powerful authorities. Accordingly, when power is restricted at this level, there is no follow through, no "muscle," no assurance of changing the status quo, retaining the powerholders' continued right to decide. Similarly, in this study, CSOs are invited to attend meetings and conferences and can share their thoughts and opinions on a specific agenda. However, there was limited evidence showing that those were acknowledged and incorporated into the committee's final decisions. CSOs' attendance in meetings is part of the legal mandates, particularly of some committees that can only have a quorum with the presence of CSOs, in the case of the Local Development Council. There should be at least one CSO signifying their membership in some LSB, committees and councils.

Table 4 shows the gaps in CSOs' extent of engagement in LSB, committees, and councils based on the Arnsteins Ladder Framework, adopted from the study of Guce and Galindes (2017). The table shows the specific gaps in every rung of the ladder based on the analysis of this research. The table further shows rung being only in the tokenism level since, based on the previous analysis in Figure two, the present study is described only within the said level. Table four analysis signifies the gaps in each rung from the current level to the highest level of the ladder. The table assumed that to achieve the next higher rung of the ladder, the specified gaps must first be addressed.

The analysis of the results obtained can serve as a valuable foundation for enhancing collaborative efforts between CSOs and LGUs, which Habermas' Critical Theory (1981) considered as communicative action. It necessitates a network of cooperation, active citizenship, collective efforts, participatory governance, and inclusivity of the CSOs to improve local governance.

**Table 4.** Gaps in CSOs' Extent of Engagement in LSB, Committees and Councils Based on Arnstein's Ladder Framework.

Arnstein's Ladder Levels	Gaps in CSOs extent of engagement
	Citizen Control
Citizen Control	<i>Limitations of the Local Government Code, and DILG MC, on CSOs' extent of engagement in LSB, committees, and councils.</i> For one, the LDC composition is 75% government and 25 % NGOs. The guidelines for CSOs' engagement need to be clarified, and there is an absence of indicators reflecting a high or low level of CSOs' engagement in local governance.
Delegation	<i>No clear guidelines on what is expected from CSOs.</i> Although CSOs are encouraged to share their thoughts and opinions during committee meetings, there must be clear guidelines for what is expected from CSOs, aside from their presence or attendance. With this notion, the LGU needs clarification on what task to delegate to CSO. Sometimes, CSOs must be aware of what to prepare during meetings.
Partnership	<i>Lack of CSO capacity to be collaborators of the LGU.</i> The limited capacity of CSOs in terms of skills and resources hampers them from becoming effective collaborators of the LGU. RA 7160 provides that the LGU shall assist NGOs. Moreover, the LGU is encouraged to join joint ventures with NGOs to deliver essential services. However, the law must clarify the extent of the partnership required between LGU and CSO. The Local Chief executive, through its Sanggunian, has the discretion for such responsibility. As a result, power is controlled only by the LGU. The study of Guce and Galindes, 2017 cited that there is no partnership if one party feels naturally inferior to another.
	Tokenism
Placation	<i>Unclear feedback mechanism guidelines.</i> Limited evidence shows that the comments and suggestions of CSOs are considered in the committee's final decisions. There are also no clear guidelines on how the CSOs would know the status of their suggestions. One of the reasons why some CSOs in the subsequent meetings need to give their input. They are aware that the LGU always controls the final decision.

**Table 4** Gaps in CSOs' Extent of Engagement in LSB, Committees and Councils Based on Arnstein's Ladder Framework (Continued).

Arnstein's Ladder Levels	Gaps in CSOs extent of engagement
Consultation	<p><i>Lack of awareness of CSO to effectively coordinate with their represented LSB, committees, and council.</i> With awareness, individuals described themselves as being empowered. (Agosti, et.al., 2019). The more CSOs are aware of their role in the committee, the more they can be empowered to engage in discussions and deliberations. The lack of awareness limits CSOs from effectively participating in the decisions making of the committee. The series of orientations conducted during the accreditation cycle seems insufficient for CSOs to have a total grasp of their responsibility as members of the committees.</p>
Informing	<p><i>Only limited platforms for collaborations are initiated.</i> The LGC mandates the LGU to open opportunities for CSO to collaborate with the LGU. The LGU is responsible for initiating activities that encourage CSOs to engage in local decision-making that would benefit the local community they represent.</p> <p>DILG MC 2018-89 stipulates that CSOs in many areas are effective in enabling services primarily in the poorest and marginalized communities.</p>

## Conclusions and Recommendations

This study underlined a critical gap in achieving genuine local participatory government. Although CSOs are present in several committees, their engagement seems to be primarily driven by compliance rather than active participation. This lack of involvement undermines collaboration and impedes the inclusion of important grassroots voices in decision-making. Several factors contribute to this issue. Prior experience has discouraged CSOs from being active members of the committees. Moreover, unclear local provisions regarding the role of CSOs create uncertainty. Current guidelines fail to outline a concrete path on how CSOs can influence the government's decisions and exercise meaningful citizen participation in planning, budgeting, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. Habermas' Critical Theory on communicative action supports CSO engagement as a pathway for direct communication between the citizens (represented by CSO) and the state (represented by the LGU) if indeed there is a high level of CSO engagement with LGU activities. The study reveals that CSO

engagement has been a moderate level of engagement which suggests that such engagement has been lukewarm and that Habermas' communicative action theory has not been in operation in the Bukidnon CSOs and LGU partnership and thus undermines the core concepts of collaborative governance. The concept thrives on active engagement from diverse stakeholders including CSOs (Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015).

Bridging this gap needs a holistic approach that fosters a true spirit of collaborative governance. First, cultivating a culture of open communication and collaboration between the local government and CSOs is crucial. Second, to strengthen CSOs' capacity through comprehensive training programs that equip them with the competencies thus making them contribute effectively. Finally, clear local guidelines and provisions that empower CSOs to advocate for grassroots voices are crucial. By dealing with these issues, and making CSOs strong partners, local governance in Bukidnon can be sustainable and inclusive.

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