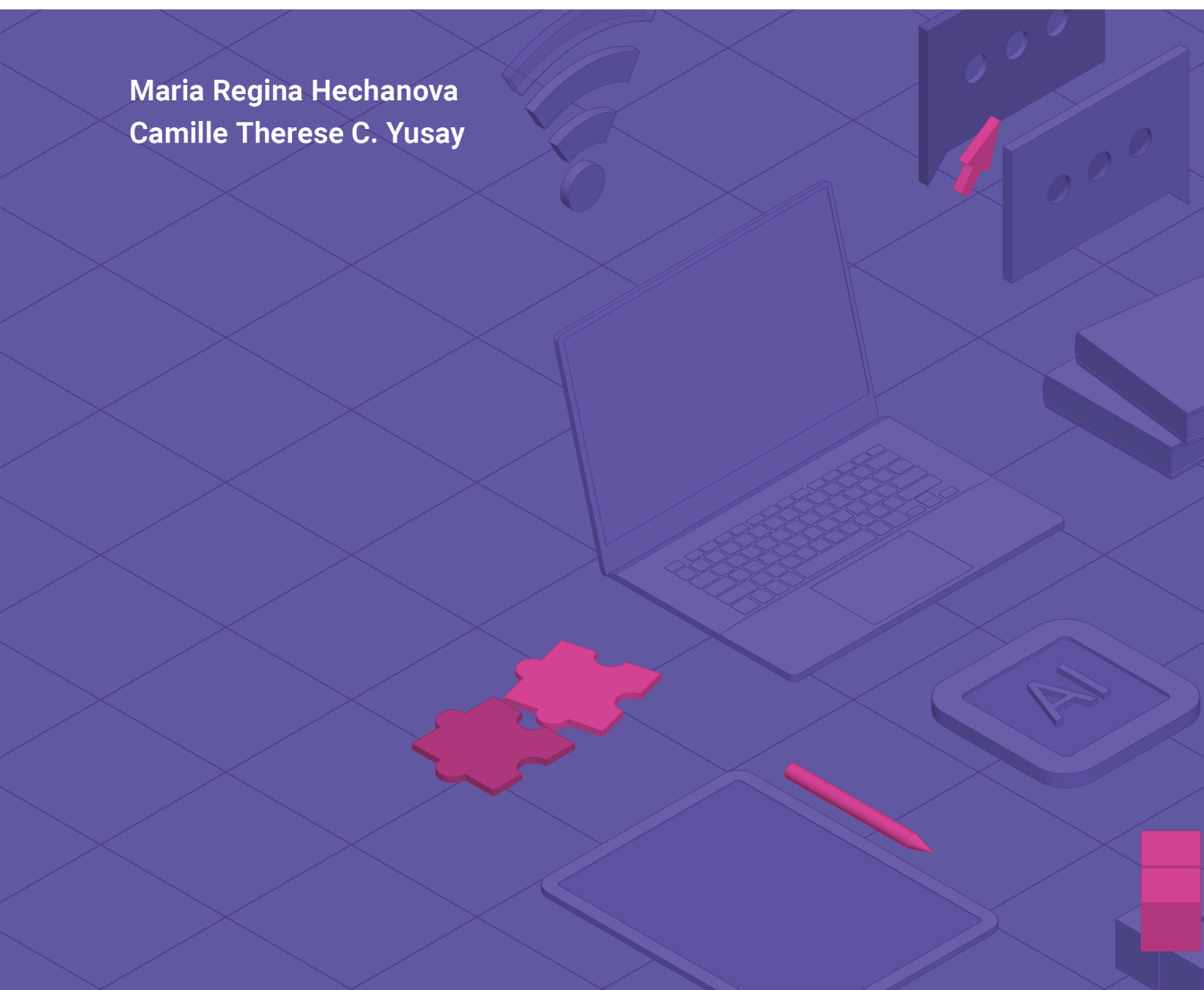


Innovations and their Enablers and Barriers in Philippine Basic Education

Policy and Governance Implications

Maria Regina Hechanova
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UP CIDS | MONOGRAPH SERIES | 2024-13

is published by the

**University of the Philippines
Center for Integrative and Development Studies**

Lower Ground Floor, Ang Bahay ng Alumni
Magsaysay Avenue, University of the Philippines
Diliman, Quezon City 1101

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ISSN 2719-0722 (Print)
ISSN 2719-0730 (Online)

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Cover design by Jose Ibarra Cunanan and Jessie Feniquito, UP CIDS Publications Unit



UP PRESIDENT
EDGARDO J. ANGARA
FELLOWSHIP

The **UP President Edgardo J. Angara (UPPEJA) Fellowship** is a grant for pioneering policy research. It aims to promote high-level policy discussions and research on a wide range of topics that address national development goals and imperatives, such as science and technology, economic development, environment and climate change, good governance, and communications.

The Fellowship was established by the University of the Philippines Board of Regents on September 29, 2008 in honor of the late Senator Edgardo J. Angara, who served as UP President from 1981 to 1987 and concurrent UP Diliman Chancellor from 1982 to 1983.

Angara, also a former Senate President, is known for his contributions to Philippine education, serving as the Chairperson of the First Congressional Commission on Education in 1990, which was credited with a number of pioneering reforms in the education sector, including its “trifocalization” and the Free Higher Education Act.

In addition to his notable contributions as a legislator, Angara’s leadership also gave rise to the **UP Center for Integrative and Development Studies (CIDS)**, which he initiated during his presidency.

Officially established on June 13, 1985, and originally called the University Center for Strategic and Development Studies (UCSDS), CIDS serves as a think tank that leverages the multidisciplinary expertise of UP to address the nation's most pressing challenges. The core objectives of CIDS encompass the development, organization, and management of research on national significance, the promotion of research and study among various university units and individual scholars, the securing of funding from both public and private sources, and the publication and wide dissemination of research outputs and recommendations.

For 2024, the Higher Education Research and Policy Reform Program (HERPRP) served as the UP PEJA Fellowship Awards secretariat in partnership with the Second Congressional Commission on Education (EDCOM II).

From the Executive Director of UP CIDS

It has been a long time in the making, but I am pleased to see the UP PEJA Fellowship finally coming to fruition. After all the forums, meetings, presentations, and threads of communication between and among the PEJA Fellows, UP CIDS' Higher Education Research and Policy Reform Program (HERPRP), and the Second Congressional Committee on Education (EDCOM 2), we now have a series of papers that tackle the various facets of Philippine higher education. The series includes the study you're reading.

For much of its history, the UP PEJA Fellowship has been housed in and implemented through the Center for Integrative and Development Studies (CIDS), the University of the Philippines' policy research unit. Over the years, the Fellowship has funded and published the studies of policy scholars, many of them luminaries in their respective fields.

In 2023, after a few years' hiatus, not least because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the UP PEJA Fellowship resumed and began looking for a new set of Fellows. This time, however, UP CIDS, through its Higher Education Research program, embarked on a historic partnership with the Second Congressional Committee on Education (EDCOM 2).

Linking directly with the government in administering the UP PEJA Fellowship was a first for UP CIDS. And that this was a partnership with a national-level policy-making body made it even more special.

As I have always maintained, this type of linkage is exactly what UP CIDS, as a policy research unit, must do: embedding research within a framework of stakeholder engagement.

Guided by the policy objectives of EDCOM 2, the PEJA papers not only tackle the complex issues in education, but also show stakeholders – the state, civil society, and the teachers themselves – how we can tackle them. For all our efforts in improving education in the Philippines, what else can and should we do?

Many thanks to the PEJA fellows for their valuable contribution, and to the UP CIDS Higher Education Research Program for shepherding this important undertaking. With collaboration, great things do happen.

Rosalie A. Hall, PhD

Executive Director

UP Center for Integrative and Development Studies

From the Convenor of UP CIDS-HERPRP

We at the Higher Education Research and Policy Reform Program serve as a convening body that builds partnerships and networks that pursue a shared research agenda and build an evidence basis for policy. Our activities include fellowships for scholars who publish with us and consultancies for junior researchers who wish to begin a career in higher education studies. We maintain databases, conduct events, and publish various manuscripts on higher education.

For 2024, our full attention was devoted to the UP PEJA Fellowship Program, serving as a secretariat for the researchers who studied higher education as it intersected with government and finance, industry and agriculture, regulation and tuition and technical and vocational education, training and lifelong learning, the UP PEJA Program awards grants for pioneering work on a wide range of topics that address national development concerns. This was the very first time that the program focused on a singular topic. This demonstrates the commitment of the University of the Philippines to higher education.

With the support of the UP Foundation, we have assembled what we have been calling the *Avengers* of Philippine education. They are preeminent scholars whose findings and recommendations directly address key policy concerns. Their papers at once draw from empirical data as well as their professional expertise for which they have been identified as a UP PEJA fellow.

Fernando dIc. Paragas, PhD

Convenor

Higher Education Research and Policy Program

UP Center for Integrative and Development Studies

Letter from the Executive Director of EDCOM II

The **Second Congressional Commission on Education (EDCOM II)** is collaborating with scholars across various institutions to provide valuable insights for the development of evidence-based policies that address the unique challenges and opportunities in the Philippine education landscape.

Our commitment to excellence, integrity, and ethical conduct in advancing research and disseminating knowledge, which we share with our research partners, is defined by the following principles:

The Commission is dedicated to upholding the highest standards of academic rigor in the evaluation, review, and dissemination of research publications. Our pledge is to ensure the integrity and quality of the knowledge we contribute to the scholarly community.

The Commission is committed to fostering transparency and data integrity in all aspects of research. This includes transparent communication, disclosure of methodologies and data sources, and providing clear guidelines to authors, reviewers, and the broader academic community.

The Commission promotes ethical research conduct, emphasizing the responsible and respectful treatment of research participants.

The Commission places a strong emphasis on accessibility. We are committed to facilitating the translation of research findings into accessible formats in order to engage the broader public, taking into account ethical and legal considerations. Our goal is to promote public understanding and awareness of scientific advancements.

In adherence to these principles, the members of the Second Congressional Commission on Education (EDCOM II) pledge to be stewards of good scholarly research for a better, more inclusive educational system for the Filipino people.

Karol Mark R. Yee, PhD

EDCOM II Executive Director

Declaration of Funding

This research was conducted in collaboration with the Second Congressional Commission (EDCOM II).

The funding source played no role in the design of the study, data interpretation, or decision to publish the findings as the author(s) maintained complete autonomy in the research process, ensuring objectivity and impartiality in the presentation of results.

Declaration of Interest

None

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Innovations and their Enablers and Barriers in Philippine Basic Education

Policy and Governance Implications

Maria Regina Hechanova and Camille Therese C. Yusay¹

Executive Summary

The Philippine Development Plan for Education 2023-2028 emphasizes the need to improve education quality, competitiveness, and governance. However, enabling innovation within a large bureaucracy can be daunting. This study examined the barriers and enablers of innovation in public schools in the Philippines. A participatory action research workshop was conducted with 31 school leaders, including regional directors, division superintendents, principals, school heads, and specialists from 10 regions in the Philippines. The workshop revealed the existence of innovations in academic programs and methodologies, student support programs, resources, and governance. Enablers of innovation included transformational leaders, enabling processes, dedicated resources, creative personnel, and supportive partners. Barriers to innovation included a culture of centralized compliance, a lack of leadership support for

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innovation, constant change in leaders and unclear directions, the presence of silos, and a lack of coordination across units. Other barriers included a lack of financial and human resources, with school leaders clamoring for greater fiscal autonomy and more human resources in the field. Participants also expressed frustrations with their inability to address basic needs for schools, such as textbooks and classrooms. They suggested the need to review national policies such as the Book Publishing Industry Development Act (RA 8047) to facilitate textbook production and RA 7880 on the construction of school buildings. The results also suggest implications to build a culture of innovation within DepEd.

Keywords: innovation, basic education, Philippines, leadership, policies

Introduction

The 2022 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) report revealed the poor performance of Filipino learners in mathematics, science, reading, and creativity compared to the rest of Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries (OECD, 2022). It also reported that more Filipino students feel unsafe and are victims of bullying compared to other students in OECD countries. However, these deficiencies and the need for reform has long been recognized. In fact, the Basic Education Development Plan (BEDP) 2030 articulates the goal of addressing education gaps by improving the quality and access to education, empowering learners, and creating a positive learning environment.

Fundamental to the BEDP 2030 is the Basic Education Governance Act of 2001 (RA 9155), which outlines national strategies to enable quality basic education services. Using the principle of shared governance, it describes the accountabilities of the DepEd at different levels. At the national level, the Central Office sets the national education standards, national education policies, and national basic education plan that provides direction to field offices. DepEd's regional offices are mandated to develop their respective regional policy frameworks that reflect the values, needs, and expectations of the communities they serve. Regional thrusts and priorities are further operationalized in the Schools Division Offices (SDOs). The SDOs provide professional and instructional advice and support to school heads, teachers, and facilitators of schools and learning centers (BEDP, 2022).

The devolution of basic education was also reinforced in the DepEd Department Order 45 of 2015, which emphasizes the importance of devolving planning, stakeholders' participation, resource mobilization, and capability building to school heads. However, the

desired learning outcomes resulting from school-based management initiatives appear yet to be realized (de Guzman, 2007). Difficulties in devolution can be partly attributed to the Department of Education's massive bureaucracy, with 47,421 schools in the public school system, 13,256 private schools, 247 basic education units operated by state universities and colleges (SUCs) or local universities and colleges (LUCs), and 25,291 child learning centers (CLCs) (BEDP, 2022).

The principle of shared governance imbued in RA 9155 suggests that leaders play an important role in enabling innovation and transformation in schools. Studies have shown that school leaders can drive education reform through a deep understanding of their context (Eley & Berryman, 2019), develop an alternative vision of education (Howard et al., 2019), and utilize collaborative and empowering leadership styles (Gano-Phillips et al., 2011).

A study on innovation in Basic Education schools in Saranggani province in the Philippines reported the feasibility of using a continuous improvement (CI) model in six schools. The adoption of continuous improvement innovations was perceived to enhance school improvement plans and classroom improvement plans. However, teachers reported challenges in the implementation of innovations, including the lack of logistical support, monitoring and evaluation, and sustainability of innovations (Martinez & Yap, 2017). Another study documents how school-based management fostered transparency, enhanced collaborative practices, and enabled stakeholder participation in decision-making (Maca, 2019). The author suggests that school-based management is a critical lever in enabling innovation in schools (Maca 2019).

Previous studies on innovation in Philippine schools have utilized case studies but there is dearth of studies on innovation from the perspective of school leaders. This study seeks to contribute to this gap by examining the experience of innovation in Philippine basic education schools from the perspective of public school leaders from different levels. Specifically, we asked:

1. What innovations have been implemented in Philippine basic education?
2. What are the barriers and enablers to sustaining innovations?
3. What policy and governance changes are needed to enable innovation?

Methods

This study utilized a participatory approach in engaging school leaders from various regions in the Philippines. Study participants consisted of 31 regional directors, division superintendents,

principals, and education specialists from 10 regions in the Philippines. A workshop on *Innovations in School Governance* was held in April 2024 to enable the sharing of innovations by school leaders. This was followed by small group discussions and plenary-sharing on the enablers and barriers to innovation. The workshop concluded by eliciting recommendations to enable innovation in Philippine basic education.

Workshop participants were invited through the Department of Education central and regional offices. All participants were asked to sign an informed consent form (ICF) before the commencement of the workshop. The ICF explained the research objectives, risks and benefits, and confidentiality of the research process, including the coding/masking of the identity of the individual and their institution. Furthermore, participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point during the workshop.

The discussions were recorded and transcribed with the help of an AI-based application. Names were anonymized during transcription to protect participants' privacy. Thematic analysis (TA) was used to analyze the data. It involved the following steps: 1) Familiarization with the data, 2) Application and validation of descriptive codes, 3) Development and validation of themes, and 4) Further analysis and policy recommendations (Fryer, 2022; Wiltshire & Ronkainen, 2021).

Findings

Innovations in School Governance

Participants shared several innovations in school governance, particularly in terms of academic instruction, non-academic programs, human resource management, and administrative processes.

Academic Innovations

Academic innovations focused on the development of teaching curricula and materials and the introduction of new methods for teaching and assessment tools. These innovations were developed to support the Basic Education Learning Recovery Plan.

Some innovations aimed to improve numeracy among learners. For example, Occidental Mindoro conducted a Division Unified Numeracy test using its DAMMATH (Division Assessment Materials in Mathematics) tool. This tool aims to assess the numeracy level of grade school learners on the most essential learning competencies (MELC) per grade level. A school leader explains: *"We created a Division Assessment Materials in Mathematics to profile our learners and determine who are non-numerates. The tool also allows us to profile the learners."* Assessment is followed by the *'Mathuto Through Laro ng Lahi'* program that uses traditional games as a means to improve the numeracy skills of Grade 4-6 non-numerates. A school

leader describes the program, *“They are taught after class for about 30 minutes to an hour. We use games like Piko to teach basic operations. We gamified examinations and quizzes. A study on the efficacy of the program showed that the percentage of numeracy increased on the fundamentals.”*

There are also several literacy programs implemented across the Philippines. The *Basa Bulilit* program of Malabon, a Reading Intervention for Grade 1 students, provides reading remediation tools that are digitized and printed for easy access for both teachers and students. This remediation program is supplemented by an incentive program for families. As a school leader explains, *“Once parents allow their children to be part of the remediation program, they can harvest from the gulayan sa paaralan (school vegetable garden). It’s a win-win. The learner will learn to read, and at the same time, the family has food on their table.”*

Region 10², on the other hand, implements Project RAEG (Reading and Arithmetic Enhancement with Gratuity), a reading and numeracy program where students from elementary to senior high school spend one hour in the morning to develop a positive attitude and instill a habit of reading for students.

The *Basa (Read)* MIMAROPA³ program seeks to go beyond teachers and students. As one school leader shared, *“It really takes a village to raise a child. Literacy is not just the job of DepEd. Even the parents should understand how to help their children and parent organizations should take on the challenge of teaching parents as part of home-school engagement.”* Related to this is Occidental Mindoro’s OCSI (oral communication skills program). This program includes oral reading 30 minutes before classes start in the morning and another 30 minutes in the afternoon after class hours, depending on the schedule of the reading teachers. Occidental Mindoro also has a reading hub in each community where reading tutors are retired teachers or practice teachers. They also tap college student volunteers who teach learners every Saturday.

Another example of innovation is Koronadal’s⁴ Reading Academy. The reading program, supported by the local government, focuses on training newly hired teachers of Kinder up to Grade 3 students. Twenty-five teachers were selected for a six-month training. Teachers were required to report on Saturdays and Sundays using the modules developed by the DepEd Central Office. The school leader adds that they *“really focused on new teachers because*

2 Region 10 is comprised of the provinces of Bukidnon, Camiguin, Lanao del Norte, Misamis Occidental, Misamis Oriental and the cities of Cagayan de Oro and Iligan

3 MIMAROPA, or Region 4B, includes the provinces of Mindoro, Marinduque, Romblon, and Palawan

4 Koronadal, or City of Koronadal, is the capital of the province of South Cotabato, Philippines

we believe that you cannot give what you don't have. We now have mentors within the program and every year, they mentor the new teachers in the lower grades. The beauty of the program is there is an accompanying structure - a reading room that was constructed and maintained by the LGU."

Other schools reported innovations in harnessing technology for assessment and instruction. In South Cotabato, six of its 10 municipalities use software that provides electronic item analysis. As a school leader explains, *"This is an extension of the electronic class record. Teachers can just enter the answers to summative tests in the electronic class record. Then, it will automatically generate the result of item analysis. This shows the competencies that are least mastered."*

Region 12⁵ proudly shared the development of contextualized learning materials. A school leader revealed that during the pandemic, they were able to develop hundreds of original and local learning materials. They also have digitized and interactive versions so learners can choose the platform they consider more interesting. To address the lack of access to the Internet, Saranggani created Learning Resources on Wheels that serve as Wi-Fi Hubs for students without Internet access. According to the school leader, it is a learner package containing an access point, antenna, router, cables, portable generator set, and tri-net pole that could cater to 200 to 500 learners within a 500-meter radius. The e-platform LRMBuild provides access to self-learning modules, videos, and assessments. Teachers encode their tests and upload them in the platform to enable paperless examinations.

In Region 9⁶, Zamboanga City uses game-based videos to emphasize specific skills, while Zamboanga del Norte aims to have one television set per classroom through *Project Otok*, recognizing the variety of forms of learning materials for students. Region 9 also harnessed digital technologies for teaching and assessment. They utilize software such as NetSupport App, which helps the teachers during synchronous learning using a gamification approach, and the MyClass App, a software that helps teachers check the attendance of the learners virtually and can immediately inform the parents of their children's grades and academic status. Another technology-driven innovation is Region 10's Computer-Based Regional Assessment Test, which serves as preparation for the international examinations being conducted in the use of computers like PISA as well as the Southeast Asian Primary Learning Metrics.

5 Region 12 in Central Mindanao is comprised of the provinces of South Cotabato, Cotabato, Sultan Kudarat and Saranggani

6 Region 9 is comprised of Zamboanga del Norte, Zamboanga Sibugay, and Zamboanga del Sur; and five cities – Dapitan, Dipolog, Pagadian, Zamboanga, and Isabela

Non-Academic Programs

Beyond academic programs, innovations are being implemented to improve non-academic support for students and their families. For example, Misamis Occidental's Project MAKAGUAPA involves planting trees (mangosteen, kalamansi, guyabano, avocado, papaya), the fruits of which are used in the schools' feeding program. As explained by a school leader, *"Project Makaguapa began in the division of Boroqueda City. They had many schools with large idle land. Instead of being overtaken by informal settlers, we decided to use the land. We got the support of the LGU, who bought the seedlings. The fruits address the nutritional needs of the kids and it generates income that is used for operations. We also implemented Project POGI in partnership with the Department of Environment and Natural Resources. This program seeks to teach students about environmental conservation and solid waste management. We also involve the barangays in tree-planting."*

Similarly, Region 6⁷ established Farm Schools where students also learn how to produce food. A leader recounted, *"It started small, just five schools, and now we are 31 schools. It is indirectly related to helping the mental wellness of our learners. They have less stress because they can produce food for their family."*

Several innovations focused on mental health, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, Region 6 partnered with the Natasha Golbourn Foundation for its *Katatagan* Program to manage depression and suicide prevention. Also known as the Stress Resilient and Mental Health Program of the 4th District, teachers were trained how to manage their emotional baggage and organize the self-learning module from grades four to 12 as part of the *Edukasyon sa Pagpapakatao* subject. Iloilo also initiated an innovation called Dreamline, a mobile application directory with a hotline directory of volunteers that provide psychological first aid. They also partnered with guidance counselors from the University of the Philippines Visayas and the Iloilo Visayas State University of Science and Technology for their learners with more specialized needs.

DepEd Rizal Province, in partnership with the University of Rizal System of Psychology professors, launched Project Streams (Strengthening Emotional and Mental Support) to strengthen the emotional and mental health of the students. Students with behavioral problems were first identified based on recommendations from the guidance office and class advisors. Psychology teachers then administered a depression scale and other instruments and conducted lectures to the students. Those identified with very high

7 Region 6, or Western Visayas, is comprised of the provinces of Aklan, Antique, Capiz, Guimaras, and Iloilo

depression or high depression were provided one-on-one counseling. According to the school leader, teachers were also equipped to understand students at-risk better. They also invited the parents of these student beneficiaries so they can better understand their children and know how they can support their children at home.

Another innovation that emerged during the pandemic was NCR⁸'s Nanay Teacher Enhancement Program. Shared one school leader, *"During the pandemic, parents were not prepared to help their children in online learning. We taught mothers how to support their children's learning. Even after the pandemic, we are still able to use this program."*

Other school innovations focus on supporting vulnerable students. For example, Rizal province has Project AKAP or *Anak, Kamusta Ang Pag-aaral*⁹. A school leader describes the program, *"We have teen-age mothers, working students, and learners at risk for dropping out or failing. Teachers reach out to them and give them academic and non-academic assistance. We do home visitations and provide remediation intervention for those who can't go to school. We support the needs of learners who don't have transportation, food, or supplies. We are in our fourth year and have seen the impact of this program. About 87% of these learners who were assisted were able to finish their school year and who were promoted to the next grade level."*

The Cordillera Administrative Region¹⁰ has a similar program called *Salakmitan ng Nama* to address learners' biopsychosocial needs. The program is specifically for financially challenged learners and their parents. Student beneficiaries are identified through home visitations and recommendations from teachers. The project also extends dental and medical services, parenting sessions, psychological support, and psychosocial activities to the learner beneficiaries and their parents. The regional director signed memoranda with partners from different provinces or cities to solicit resources. These resources are consolidated and distributed across the region.

In the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) and Region 9, an adolescent reproductive health program was implemented to respond to increasing rates of teenage pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections, and mental health issues. Project *Tib-Ong* created school teen centers and trained peer facilitators to be available for students to confide to. As shared by the school leader, having a peer to confide in was

8 National Capital Region

9 Roughly translates to: "My child, how is school?"

10 The Cordillera Administrative Region is comprised of six provinces: Abra, Apayao, Benguet, Ifugao, Kalinga and Mountain Province.

helpful. In one instance, two students confided to their peer facilitator that they were victims of incestuous rape. The peer facilitators encouraged them to report this to their advisor, who referred them to the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) to handle their cases.

Governance Innovations

School leaders also reported innovations related to capacity building. Region 12 provides Coaching & Mentoring Capacity Building to Aspiring School Heads, Region 10 has Project CELLS (Course for Executives in Learners & Leadership in Schools), and Region 6 has a Schools Heads Academy that provides four-month schooling of school heads with a tertiary education partner. According to a school leader from Region 6, the local government of Iloilo City sponsors school heads who have less training in school management to study in a partner tertiary school such as the West Visayas State University, Iloilo State College, or Iloilo School of Arts and Trades University. After earning about a year of study, they are given the opportunity to present an innovation, discuss how they will implement the innovation, and share about their learnings when they attended the school. It also helps teachers prepare for the National Qualifying Examination for school heads.

Apart from training school leaders, other innovations that build the capacity of school personnel are also present. For example, NCR's Project DARE (Developing Administrative Resiliency and Engagement in the Workplace) is a capacity-building and training program for non-teaching personnel, including canteen workers, clerks, and security guards. Target trainees are first surveyed based on their needs to ensure an evidence-based approach. After capacity-building, they are offered livelihood programs due to the low wages of non-teaching personnel. According to the school leader, *"We want them to feel that in our school, everyone is important and cared for."*

Because teachers play a critical role in determining the quality of education a student receives, some schools focus on improving their quality of life. A school leader from MIMAROPA described its Services on Wheels program, *"Because our service areas are in seven major islands and 47 islets, just providing support services to personnel is challenging. We surveyed our personnel on requested frontline services and provided needs-based services. For example, we invite representatives from PAG-IBIG, GSIS, PhilHealth, BIR, and LTO so teachers have a one-stop shop in the Schools Division Office. This year, we are expanding to a virtual version to make things faster and accessible for our MIMAROPA team and members."*

Similarly, Region 11¹¹ has implemented *Project Kaabag* (help). A working group including the principals, assistant principals, department heads, and subject group heads was created to address teacher concerns and provide peer support. They call themselves ‘navigators’ and go on trips as a form of mental health care. They conduct fundraising and *paluwagan*¹² to travel.

Other schools have implemented innovations to motivate their personnel. Bukidnon implements DepEd’s ZEAL Awards to recognize teachers and other personnel who have exemplary performance. Malabon has its *Sagwan* Awards, an on-the-spot rewards and recognition program. For every good deed, a sticker in the shape of a *sagwan* (oar) is given to the teacher or school personnel. They are accumulated in a rewards card and given an award quarterly for every 10 stickers collected. During the PRAISE months of November and December, those with the most stickers become part of the awardees.

Other innovations focus on improving processes. Region 12 sought to streamline the application of schools for the renewal of their permit to operate. One of their scholars from the Development Academy of the Philippines created the Facilitative Accessible Streamlined & Timebound Application for Permit Process (FAST APP) to make the permit process more efficient. This saves the schools time and resources for traveling.

Region 6’s innovation was on streamlining the retirement process of teachers. A chronic problem in the region was the provident and legal clearance process that retirees go through. It was time-consuming and arduous that retirees often depart with a frown. According to the school leader, *“We felt the dilemma and frustration of the retirees, so we analyzed the flow and bottlenecks and brainstormed solutions on how to make the process easier. We eventually found a solution by downloading provident clearances to divisions instead of the region. Now retirees only need to submit to us one document, and we handle their legal clearances.”*

Enablers to innovation

Leadership

A primary enabler of innovation at the local and national levels is the type and support of leadership. Three main themes emerged from the discussion on what enables innovations when it comes to leadership: 1) inspiring leaders, 2) accountable and competent leaders,

11 Also called Davao Region, it is comprised of It is composed of five provinces – Davao del Sur, Davao del Norte, Davao Oriental, Davao Occidental and Compostela Valley

12 Savings cooperative

and 3) support from top management. A superintendent shared that *“leaders should be inspiring to make innovation easy,”* while another shared that there needs to be *“a sense of accountability to people that we work and serve.”* As part of accountability, participants shared that risk-taking is also important to enable innovation. According to one participant, *“You should be a risk-taker. If you know that the innovation is for the good of teachers and learners, even if the directive doesn't come from the central office, you can still do it. If you are reprimanded, you can justify that it is for the learners and teachers”.* Some programs aim to develop competent leaders, such as the superintendent leadership program and the School Head Development program. Communication skills, planning skills, partnership skills, and networking were highlighted as important competencies to enable innovation. Lastly, what enables innovative thinking and initiatives is strong support from top management.

People

Aside from leaders, the people on the ground help enable innovative practices. Participants suggested that hardworking teachers and staff and their creativity and grit enabled innovation. One participant shared, *“Those in DepEd are hardworking and brilliant. Many teachers are very creative and resilient. We will do everything even if we are struggling. We are surviving.”*

Resources

Resources emerged as critical to enabling innovation. Resources cited include the Basic Education Research Fund, budget, and school data/information. A participant suggested that one solution to the lack of resources is finding partners to increase budgets. Another participant mentioned that the Basic Education Research Fund (BERF) should be increased to include innovations and not just policy development and research, as there needs to be specific funding for innovation. School data is seen as an information source to identify gaps. Innovation should be data-driven, depending on the context of the school.

Partnership

Given the lack of resources, school leaders turned to partners to finance innovations. These included partnerships with private Institutions, higher education institutions, industries, parent-teacher associations, and alumni associations. Other leaders partnered with local government units to utilize their special education funds. Several participants mentioned that *“most innovations are partnerships.”*

Process

Lastly, some processes also stand out as an enabler of innovation. These include both external reinforcements and internal awareness. Rewards and recognition for innovation, communication and awareness of DepEd orders, and benchmarking and exposure to other institutions and innovative practices enable innovative thinking and practice. Rewards and recognition promote the continuous initiative of teachers in thinking of innovative practices within their schools. One participant from SDO Bukidnon mentioned, *“Our ZEAL Awards recognize teachers and other personnel who have exemplary performance in their respective jobs; anyone who will have that award will be given support.”* Lastly, exposure to other innovative practices in other places is another important process to jumpstart innovative thinking. A participant from Sarangani shared that their Learning Resources on Wi-Fi Hub for Expanded e-Learning (LR on WHEeLs) has been benchmarked by other schools in the country. Exposure to such models may inspire teachers. One school leader shared that *“increasing awareness on the impact of innovation is important.”*

Barriers to Innovation

Leadership

An issue raised by school leaders was the unclear directions of the Department of Education. As shared by one school leader, *“We, the school heads, are trying to monitor everything in school. But sometimes our fellow teachers cannot understand the rationale behind these changes because of unclear directions.”*

Another barrier was poor communication and limited awareness of the orders and memos from DepEd. *“Transparency is important in communication,”* as mentioned by one participant.

The continuous change of leaders was also cited as a reason behind the lack of continuity of programs. As shared by a school leader, *“Each administration has priorities. Innovations that are done under one administration are discontinued by the next administration.”* This ‘not-invented-here’ mindset leads to leaders starting from scratch rather than building on the gains of the past. This happens not only at the DepEd Central Office but at the regional, division, and school levels as well. For another school leader, *“Long-term solutions are hard to address, especially when a new administration has different directions. For example, the initiatives of a regional director (RD) will not be continued by a new RD. This happens again and again.”*

Other barriers include the presence of silos, parochiality, and the lack of coordination between units. As shared by a school leader, *“The bureaus don’t interface. They act on their own and have their own activities and don’t coordinate, so activities overlap. Those of us in the field get*

confused and experience difficulties complying with their schedules.” This is echoed by another participant, “There are so many programs being brought down that we are expected to implement. Each bureau comes up with their own program and the burden on implementation falls on us.”

Culture

Beyond unclear directions, participants cited that a barrier to innovation was a lack of leadership support for innovation. They explained that ideas from the grassroots are not supported by the Central Office. They suggested that this can also be attributed to a centralized culture and the absence of empowerment and trust. As shared by leaders, *“In our culture, the decisions always come from the top. Without a memo, you can’t move.”* This was echoed by another leader, *“There’s a compliance culture, and the reporting requirements are rigid.”* Another explains, *“For example, there’s a program. They will say, everyone has a leeway– that we can contextualize as mandated by the law. But when it comes to reporting, you will be tagged if you are not compliant. In the national markup, you would be mentioned as non-compliant and shamed.”*

What leaders clamor for is for greater autonomy. A participant suggests, *“Leaders should just identify standards and policies governing those standards. They should allow regions to implement programs the way they think it should be implemented.”* Another leader suggests that even if standards may be difficult to establish, *“I wish they will just give us a range of standards and allow us to contextualize– not necessarily one-size-fits-all. Because problems are not true to all”.* Other leaders suggest that there appear to be trust issues: *“It feels like they have trust issues. They must trust us that we can do it.”*

Policies

The centralized and compliance culture within the Department of Education appears to be a product of several factors, one of which is leadership style. However, leaders also attributed the centralization to rigid reporting requirements. As explained by one leader, *“Our monitoring and evaluation standards do not allow contextualization. It is one-size-fits-all.”*

The lack of clarity of directions is also partly policy-related. As a participant noted, *“Sometimes a directive is given that conflicts with other policies. For example, we were told not to assign teachers any duties outside teaching. But there is also a policy saying that school boards need to be represented. Am I supposed to appoint someone like an administrative clerk to sit on the school board just to comply with this policy even when common sense says that it should be a teacher?”*

Even among school leaders, however, there appear to be different perspectives concerning autonomy. On one hand, some believe that policies and guidelines need to be unified, *“I think DepEd should streamline its process. Like if we need to implement a feeding program, the*

process should be from the top down to the school level so we are doing the same thing. But what is happening is that implementation differs by context.” Another weighs in, “There are times that central office is very silent with regard to issuances, and there are a lot of gray areas.” On the other hand, other leaders believe that context does matter and contextualization is a reality, “The guidelines should be unified. But the reason why schools innovate is because they have different problematic areas. That’s because we deliver it differently.”

In other instances, new directions are not implemented because of a lack of alignment with other systems. A school leader explained, *“We have a policy on functional literacy. But it is not implemented because it is not in our performance indicators.”* Some leaders noted that policies developed by the Central Office can be reactive, not evidence-based, developed in silos, and lack consultation, causing issues. A participant observed that *“Some of the leaders spearheading policy development lacked experience and functional competence. Policies designed to solve a problem created by a minority end up punishing the majority.”*

Still, others suggest that policies are not implemented because they are not communicated well. There are gaps in implementation, lack of orientation, and different interpretations of policies. As one school leader explains, *“The policy says that school monitoring and evaluation plan adjustment (SMEPA) should be done quarterly. But if a school head does not conduct SMEPA, it’s okay. They’ll just do it next quarter.”* However, another school leader chimes in, *“So that means there is a problem in the division. Because in our division, if you do not pass your SMEPA,... you will personally go to the SDS office to explain why you were not able to pass it. Another leader echoes this, “Performance across divisions differ. Some divisions perform and others do not.”*

Although some regions have initiated leadership development programs, some leaders suggest the need for a more systematic leadership development within DepEd. As one school leader opined, *“We are trained to be teachers. But there is no training to be a leader.”*

Resources

A common barrier cited by school leaders is finding resources for innovations. While some regions and schools can harness technology, others report that the lack of connectivity and equipment are barriers. Government budgeting processes remain a challenge for public schools. As one leader shared, *“We need to simplify things because just getting the budget is a complicated process. The Maintenance and Other Operating Expenses (MOOE) budget is created the year before. If in the middle of the school year, you want to innovate you will have to wait until next year or look for resources elsewhere.”* Another school leader shared that the process for obtaining resources from LGUs is cumbersome, *“I submitted my papers in January, (and) it was approved in November.”*

Structure and Staffing

Those in the field claim to lack both financial and human resources. Some leaders suggest the need to restructure DepEd, citing that *“There are more than 2,000 (people) in the Central Office. The positions should be given to regions and divisions. We have so many problems in the field like the lack of teachers.”* The clamor to devolve was evident in comments such as, *“Devolve – we really need to devolve. Lessen the budget, lessen the people, and download them to the field offices.”* One leader cited that attempts to rationalize the structure failed. *“The rationalization program was a failure. Instead of decreasing the people at Central, the staffing increased. And of course, if they have more people and more budget they need to spend, they have to think of programs.”* Another leader chimed in, *“If they don’t use up the budget, they will get penalized. They should just devolve their budgets to the regions and focus on policy and standards.”*

Recommendations

Policy Development

School leaders suggested the need to review critical national policies such as RA 9155 and enshrine the devolution of authority and devolution of finances and human resources. Another national policy cited was RA 7880, which transfers responsibility for the construction of school buildings to the Department of Public Works and Highways. Finally, leaders suggested the need to repeal RA 8047 or the National Book Development Board. As explained by a leader, *“There is a law that only private publishers are allowed. However, the expertise is within DepEd. That is what I don’t understand – why depend on private publishers who are not conversant with the curriculum? In reality, 80% of the authors of the books are also from DepEd.”*

Mechanisms to Support Innovation

School leaders unanimously agreed that innovations are necessary. However, they suggest that innovations need to also be based on data. As one school leader explains, *“The number one question is, why do we innovate? Innovations should result from our monitoring and evaluation. We need to interpret and analyze data, come up with collaborative solutions, and develop innovations that address the gaps.”* They also cited the need to evaluate innovations to institutionalize them.

Discussion

The results suggest that innovation can and does happen in Philippine basic education public schools. However, the extent to which they have made a difference in improving the quality of education cannot be ascertained due to the lack of monitoring and evaluation. Moreover, there is a lack of mechanisms and resources to scale up interventions from one region to another.

A key barrier to scaling up innovations appears to be the centralized culture of the Department of Education. School leaders clamor for greater empowerment and the need to decentralize both financial and human resources. However, this finding is not new. Two decades ago, Brillantes (1999) already noted the conflict between a highly centralized governmental structure and demands for autonomy among the component local units in the education sector. Given these findings, enabling sustained innovation in the Department of Education will require changes in both policy and governance.

Policy Recommendations

Policies are important barriers and enablers of autonomy and empowerment. School leaders identified three salient national policies that need to be revisited. The Basic Education Law (RA 9155) is a foundational policy that emphasizes the need to decentralize school governance and devolve fiscal, human resources, and programmatic autonomy to the regional, division, district, and school levels. Enacted in 2001, feedback from school leaders suggests that the intent of this law has not been realized. School leaders clamored for more funding and human resources in the field. As such, there may be a need for revisions to enshrine the devolution of authority and financial and human resources.

Regional Directors and District Superintendents expressed frustrations with their inability to address basic needs for schools such as textbooks and classrooms because of policy constraints. They specifically cited the need to review the Book Publishing Industry Development Act (RA 8047) to facilitate the speed of textbook production and the Fair and Equitable Access to Education Act (RA 7880), which centralizes the construction of school buildings to DPWH.

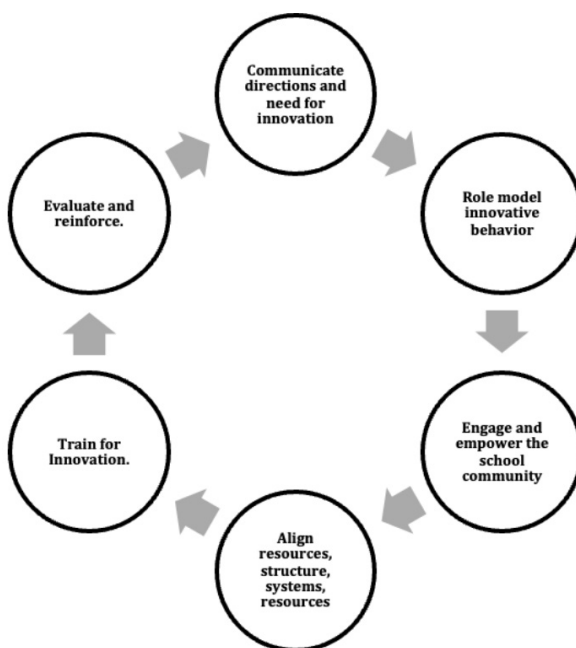
At a departmental level, it was suggested that there was a need to create a policy to support innovation. Currently, Department Order 16-2017 (Research Management Guidelines) serves as a guide in managing research initiatives at the national, regional, school division, and school levels. This policy seeks to build on the gains in evidence-based decision-making from various education reforms or initiatives and strengthen the

research culture in DepEd. It seeks to improve support mechanisms for research, such as funding, partnerships, and capacity building, and reinforces the link of research to education processes through research dissemination, utilization, and advocacy. School leaders suggested the need to review and expand the Basic Education Research Fund and to highlight the need for evidence-based school initiatives as part of the Basic Education Research Agenda. As suggested, a policy on innovation should articulate the goals around which the innovations are to be developed and provide resources and mechanisms to do needs analysis, monitoring and evaluation, and documentation. There also should be funding to scale up evidence-based interventions. To further incentivize people, innovation can also be included as a criterion for promotion and rewards.

Beyond reviewing and/or developing policies to enable innovation, the results also highlight the importance of an improved process for policy development and dissemination. As suggested in the findings, policies are sometimes reactive and designed to correct the mistakes of a few, which end up penalizing the majority. However, due to bureaucratic processes, policy consultations can take a lot of time and resources. One possibility is for DepEd to have a structure similar to what is done in universities that have monthly forums or council meetings to discuss policy and program changes, where participants are given copies of proposals in advance. Rather than each Bureau scheduling separate consultations, having a regular venue for policy consultation and implementation may pave the way for a more uniform application of policies. These meetings can also serve as a means to communicate directions.

Governance Implications

Beyond policies, the results also suggest that DepEd's bureaucratic culture is a critical barrier to innovation. How does one create a culture of innovation in a massive bureaucracy? The Ateneo Center for Organization Research and Development developed a culture-building framework called CREATE (Hechanova & Caringal-Go, 2018; Villaluz & Hechanova, 2019) (see Figure 1). This stands for Communicate desired value, Role model innovative behavior, Engage and empower organization members, Align structures, systems, resources with desired value, Train for value and Evaluate and reinforce desired values. Applying the CREATE framework to DepEd, Figure 1 documents recommendations to build a culture of innovation in DepEd.

FIGURE 1. BUILDING A CULTURE OF INNOVATION IN DEPED

Communicate directions and the need for innovation

A key feedback of school leaders is the lack of clarity of direction. Establishing and communicating a vision for the future is critical to building buy-in and motivating DepEd stakeholders. Moreover, the importance of innovation and what will happen if DepEd fails to innovate needs to be communicated continuously using multiple channels. Part of this communication is the need to shift away from the culture of blind compliance and ‘memocracy’ to a culture of innovation.

Role modeling

Role modeling implies that DepEd leaders need to be able to demonstrate openness and support for new ideas. As enshrined in RA 9155, the role of a school leader is to create an environment that is conducive to teaching and learning and introduce new and innovative modes of instruction to achieve higher learning outcomes. The centralized and compliance culture of DepEd appears to be a barrier. Results suggest that this culture does not only apply to the Central Office but is also mirrored down the bureaucracy. DepEd leaders need to be trained on how to support innovation. In addition, recognition should also be given to encourage leaders to support innovation.

Engage and empower the school community

Lasting change is not possible without a critical mass of people who will champion change, especially when leaders come and go. As such, it is important to empower the school community. Over the past decades, the role of teachers has evolved, as the positive influence they can exert on educational transformation has been recognized (Muijs & Harris, 2016). Danielson (2006) first coined the term “teacher leaders” to describe *“individuals whose influence extends beyond the classroom and are instrumental in shaping school culture, fostering collaboration among colleagues, and promoting continuous improvement in teaching and learning.”* He suggests that actively engaging teachers in decision-making processes fosters a sense of shared responsibility and accountability and enables them to become catalysts for positive organizational change (Danielson, 2006). However, a study by Alegado (2018) reports that school leadership in the Philippines is “principal-centered”, an administrative-centric approach that hinders empowerment and constrains the potential of teachers to enable transformation (Groenewald et al., 2023). All of these imply the need to ensure that the training of DepEd school leaders should also include the role of leadership in enabling innovation.

Align resources, structure & systems

The findings validate a previous study on challenges in the implementation of innovations, including the lack of logistical support and sustainability of innovations (Martinez & Yap, 2017). Findings suggest the need to align the current structure and staffing of DepEd to focus on providing more personnel at the regional, district, and school levels. Concomitant is the need for fiscal autonomy. However, fiscal autonomy also requires readiness on the part of schools. As such, creating a readiness checklist and pilot-testing decentralization may be needed. Finally, systems for supporting and scaling evidence-based innovations are needed to harness existing efforts.

Train for Innovation

Another key constraint cited is the turnover of DepEd officials which hinders continuity. However, this is not only true at the central level but at the regional and school levels as well. Principals are routinely rotated to different jurisdictions, which makes it difficult for them to perform their roles (Alegado, 2018). The constant turnover of principals disrupts the continuity of initiatives (Miramon et al., 2024). These findings suggest the need to strengthen capacity building for school leaders and the need for a more systematic succession and talent development process. Such a system may include a regular cycle of identification of talent or potential leaders, creation of a development plan per talent, implementation of the development plan, and a monitoring and evaluation process.

At the same time, if DepEd is to build a culture of innovation, capacity building needs to begin with teachers. A study by Zhou et al. (2013) suggests four competencies related to innovative teaching: learning competencies (the attitudes and knowledge and ability to learn new things), social competencies (the willingness to share information and cooperate with others to solve problems), technological competencies (the ability and openness to use modern technologies), and educational competencies (including the ability to mobilize students learning and interests in class). However, participants also highlighted communication, planning skills, and partnership and networking skills as important competencies to enable innovation.

Evaluate and reinforce

Despite existing mechanisms to reinforce innovations within DepEd, what appears to be missing is the monitoring and evaluation of innovations. Results align with a study that reports a lack of monitoring and evaluation of innovations (Martinez & Yap, 2017). These also require a different set of competencies, including measurement and assessment, design thinking, and quantitative and qualitative research skills.

Conclusion

This study sought to contribute to knowledge on innovation initiatives and barriers and enablers to innovation in Philippine public schools. Results suggest that innovations do take place at the school, district, and regional levels. However, more evidence on the impact of innovations is needed to scale and sustain them. Moreover, improvements in policy and governance within the Department of Education are needed to enable a culture of innovation.

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Acknowledgement and Disclaimer

This project was funded by EDCOM II. The authors also wish to thank Dr. Assunta Cuyegkeng and the Lily Gokongwei Ngochua Leadership Academy and Ms. Amihan Perez and the USAID Renewhealth project. Any views, statements, or analyses expressed in this paper are those of the authors and should not be attributed to those of EDCOM II, the Lily Gokongwei Ngochua Leadership Academy, and the United States Agency for International Development.

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This policy paper is funded from the UP President Edgardo J. Angara Fellowship Award for 2024, and is released under the Monograph Series published by the University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies.



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