

LOCAL REGIONAL STUDIES NETWORK

From Community Initiatives to Sustainable Development

Strengthening Support for Civil Society Organizations

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Introduction

Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) play a crucial role in promoting socio-economic and political development by complementing government support where it is insufficient. By leveraging their expertise in advocacy, capacity building, and community mobilization, CSOs bridge the gap between policy frameworks and the realities experienced by communities on the ground. While many CSOs act to complement government efforts, some, however, take a more proactive role by initiating and implementing development projects independently.

Operating independently from local government units (LGUs), however, entails challenges, including limited coordination, overlapping efforts, and gaps in policy support, which can constrain the sustainability of CSOs' community-led projects. Collaboration between the state and civil society is essential for civil society to effectively support the community's development initiatives. The idea that development outcomes improve when state institutions and civil society actors work jointly reflects the core principles of collaborative governance. Ansell and Gash (2008, 544) describe this approach as a mode of governing in which public authorities involve non-government stakeholders. This involvement takes place through structured, dialogue-based decision-making processes that emphasize consensus and deliberation. The goal of these processes is to shape or implement public policies and programs, as well as to manage public resources.

In the Philippine context, this governance model has been reinforced through a range of policy issuances that formally integrate civil society participation into local governance mechanisms. An examination of 137 collaborative governance initiatives spanning multiple policy areas identified several determinants of successful collaboration. These include the nature of previous interactions among stakeholders, the motivations driving participation, as well as disparities in power and access to resources. Beyond these contextual conditions, the study highlighted the importance of the collaborative process itself. It was observed that sustained cooperation is often fostered through incremental achievements, or "small wins." These gradually build trust, reinforce commitment, and enhance mutual understanding among participants (Pasamonte 2024). This reveals the critical role of relationship-building between government institutions and civil society actors in ensuring meaningful and effective collaborative decision-making.

Insights and Evidence from CSOs and Their Constituent POs in Cebu and Bohol

Insights from recent focus group discussions reveal several key observations and lessons from non-governmental CDD.

Development without consultation becomes development aggression.

The current situation of farmers' associations, vendors, and fisherfolk in Cebu and Bohol reveals that development initiatives implemented without community consultation are not experienced as progress but as development aggression. Representatives from POs described how redevelopment projects and land-related interventions were introduced with little-to-no engagement with affected communities, which left them uninformed, unprepared, and excluded from decision-making processes that directly shaped their livelihoods and living conditions.

Farmers and vendors emphasized that the absence of consultation often resulted in displacement and livelihood loss, particularly when land conversion, privatization, or infrastructure projects were undertaken. One vendor opined: *"Kung muingon og kalambuan, kinahanglan magsugod sa ubos, sa mga tawo nga maapektuhan gyud, dili sa ibabaw"* (If we speak of development, it must start from below, from the people who are directly affected, not from the top).

They further emphasized that non-consultative development processes tend to prioritize commercial and political interests over social equity. In rural and peri-urban areas, the lack of dialogue has also been accompanied by coercive practices, including the presence of armed personnel, surveillance, and legal action against farmers asserting land rights. As one farmer shared, *"Dili mi basta makalihok-libok kay pirmi naay roving, armado pa gyud"* (We cannot move around freely because there are always roving armed personnel). These conditions create an atmosphere of fear that constrains daily agricultural work and discourages collective organizing.

Public and community-managed spaces sustain livelihoods.

Vendors and fisherfolk from Carbon Market emphasized that publicly managed markets and community-controlled lands have historically been vital in supporting livelihoods, particularly for low-income vendors, small-scale farmers, and informal workers. Such spaces provided affordable access to rent, markets, and essential resources, enabling communities to generate income and sustain daily subsistence. In contrast, privatization and corporate-led management (e.g., by Megawide) led to higher costs, stricter regulations, and limited access, thereby excluding small vendors and farmers from previously accessible

economic opportunities. They highlighted that safeguarding public and community-managed spaces is essential not only for economic survival but also for equitable, inclusive, and sustainable development.

CSOs fill critical service gaps left by the state

Farmers and community members emphasized that civil society organizations (CSOs), such as the Central Visayas Farmers' Development Center (FARDEC), play a vital role in addressing gaps left by government services. During critical periods, such as the dry season, water was scarce and distant in communities across Toledo and Aloguinsan, making it difficult to sustain crops and meet daily household needs. FARDEC intervened by initiating water projects and livelihood programs. As one farmer explained, *"Ni abot to naay ni tabang sa mga kauban sa FARDEC, so ni tumaw gyod among proyekto"* (It was only when the FARDEC team came to help that our project was able to push through). Another added, *"Kung walay organisasyon, lisod gyod ang pagpadayon sa among uma"* (Without the organization, it would be very difficult to sustain our farm).

Existing Policies

The Philippines has a range of policies recognizing the importance of community participation, local governance, and support for civil society initiatives. Key among these is Republic Act No. 7160 or the Local Government Code of 1991, which decentralizes governance and mandates LGUs to involve communities in planning, budgeting, and implementing development projects. At the local government level, CSO participation is mandated through mechanisms such as Local Special Bodies. These include Local Development Councils, Local Health Boards, and Local Peace and Order Councils. In these bodies, accredited CSOs and people's organizations are represented in policymaking and oversight (Medina-Guce, Velasco, and Rey 2025).

The Department of the Interior and Local Government (DILG) has issued Memorandum Circulars, such as MC No. 2018-89 and its successors. These provide guidelines on the accreditation and engagement of CSOs in government programs and projects. Specifically, they outline CSO participation in planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation, and often require formal accreditation to qualify for partnership roles (DILG 2018). These guidelines are grounded in constitutional and statutory mandates to encourage CSO involvement in governance and public services.

Collaborative governance also extends to budget processes. The House of Representatives' interim guidelines, such as MC No. 20-002 operationalizing House Resolution No. 94, allow accredited CSOs and people's organizations to observe national budget hearings. They also provide access to budget documents and the opportunity to submit position papers. These measures are in place while more permanent institutional mechanisms are still under discussion (Philippine News Agency 2025). At the national legislative level, proposals such as bills to institutionalize CSO participation in budget preparation aim to formalize these roles further, although such measures are still under legislative deliberation.

In the domain of public procurement, the Republic Act No. 12009 or the "New Government Procurement Act" and its Implementing Rules and Regulations recognize CSOs as observers in government procurement processes. The law mandates the Bids and Awards Committees to invite at least two observers from qualified CSOs or private groups. This measure aims to enhance transparency and accountability in public spending. Public procurement reforms include tools like the Procurement Observer's Portal, which facilitates CSO registration and monitoring participation (GPPB-TSO n.d.).

Although legal frameworks exist, gaps remain between policy and practice. Research shows that these laws are not always translated into meaningful opportunities for CSO engagement (OGP 2019), and measuring the impact of collaborative programs is often challenging (Orbista 2012). Limited resources, capacity, and government support further constrain CSOs' ability to participate effectively (Pasamonte 2024). Most past studies have focused only on government-led programs and have failed to see the broader role of CSOs in non-governmental initiatives.

The assessment of the Philippine Development Plan (PDP) 2023-2028 highlighted continuing challenges in ensuring meaningful CSO participation in Local Special Bodies (LSBs), committees, and councils. While policy frameworks recognize CSOs as key partners in local governance, their actual involvement across local government units remains uneven and, in many cases, limited in scope. This situation points to a broader gap between institutional intent and on-the-ground implementation.

In practice, CSO representation remains relatively low, with only around half of barangays including CSO members in their Barangay Development Councils

and roughly 14,000 barangay-based NGOs accredited nationwide. These figures suggest that existing mechanisms for accreditation and participation have not yet fully translated into broad-based inclusion at the community level. Moreover, several LGUs have yet to fully operationalize DILG issuances that mandate the establishment of CSO desks and people's councils, which are intended to serve as institutional entry points for citizen engagement.

Beyond structural gaps, LGUs have also noted that some CSOs face capacity constraints that limit their ability to contribute effectively to committee discussions and deliberative processes. Although the DILG and LGUs regularly conduct seminars, workshops, and training programs, these interventions are often fragmented and insufficient to address evolving policy environments. Continuous and adaptive capacity development is therefore necessary to ensure CSOs remain informed of government policies, procedures, and technical requirements.

As a result, CSO participation in many committees largely becomes procedural, with attendance prioritized over substantive engagement and only a limited number of CSO inputs reflected in final decisions. While legal compliance is generally observed, the PDP 2023-2028 emphasizes that deepening participatory governance goes beyond formal representation. It calls for the creation of functional platforms that actively inform and consult citizens, enable constructive dialogue, and provide CSOs with clear roles and meaningful influence at every stage of public decision-making, from agenda setting to policy formulation, implementation, and monitoring.

Policy Objectives

This policy brief aims to strengthen collaboration between non-governmental CDD initiatives and local governments so that community projects are more effective and sustainable. It provides guidance for policymakers, LGUs, CSOs, and other stakeholders in promoting collaborations that empower communities, protect livelihoods, and maximize the developmental potential of non-governmental CDD initiatives.

Policy Recommendations for Collaborative Governance

There are four proposed policy alternatives that the government, in collaboration with CSOs, may consider implementing.

Institutionalize Community Consultation Mechanisms

Structured consultation mechanisms make sure that affected communities are engaged at every stage of development projects, from planning to implementation. Experiences from Cebu and Bohol show that projects implemented without consultation often result in displacement, livelihood loss, social tensions, and community resentment.

While older policies encourage participation in principle, they rarely make consultation mandatory or structured. By formalizing consultation processes, local governments, in partnership with CSOs and community groups, can require participatory planning sessions, social and environmental impact assessments, and grievance redress mechanisms for all development projects. These mechanisms provide avenues for community members to voice concerns, suggest alternatives, and negotiate trade-offs before decisions are finalized. Institutionalized consultations not only facilitate inclusive decision-making but also strengthen trust between authorities and residents, making sure that interventions are socially equitable and locally relevant.

Strengthen CSO Accreditation and Engagement

Current DILG guidelines provide for basic CSO accreditation, primarily granting formal recognition for participation in local governance. However, strengthening accreditation guarantees that CSOs are not merely acknowledged but actively empowered to participate throughout the governance process.

Streamlined procedures, expanded eligibility criteria, and clearly defined roles allow CSOs to co-design programs, implement projects, and provide context-specific expertise. Empowered CSOs serve as bridges between communities and government, translating local knowledge and needs into actionable policies and interventions. Strengthened accreditation also promotes predictable and sustained engagement, ensuring that CSO involvement is integral to local governance rather than symbolic or *ad hoc*. This

approach institutionalizes civil society's role as a partner in delivering programs, monitoring outcomes, and providing feedback, enhancing responsiveness and inclusivity at the local level.

Capacity-Building and Knowledge Sharing

Effective collaboration requires both community members and government personnel to possess the skills, knowledge, and organizational capacity to participate meaningfully. Capacity-building programs can cover areas such as participatory governance, project management, legal rights, conflict resolution, and resource mobilization. For communities, these programs enable representatives to articulate priorities clearly, negotiate with authorities, and manage local initiatives effectively. For government staff, training strengthens their ability to facilitate participatory processes, coordinate multi-stakeholder engagement, and respond to local concerns. Knowledge-sharing platforms further allow best practices and lessons from successful community-driven development initiatives to be documented, disseminated, and replicated across municipalities and regions. This combination of training and shared learning enhances the overall effectiveness and sustainability of collaborative governance processes.

Monitoring, Evaluation, and Accountability Frameworks

Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) frameworks institutionalize accountability and enable adaptive governance. Co-created M&E systems, developed jointly by LGUs, CSOs, and community representatives, allow stakeholders to track project implementation, assess social and economic impacts, and provide feedback for improvements. Participatory tools, such as community scorecards, audits, and public hearings, make government actions more transparent and accountable to the communities they serve. Unlike older frameworks, which often rely on top-down reporting, participatory M&E ensures that interventions remain responsive to local needs, allowing for timely adjustments to improve outcomes. These frameworks also facilitate documentation of lessons learned, creating a feedback loop that strengthens future governance and planning efforts while fostering trust between government and civil society.

Conclusion

Bridging non-governmental CDD and local governance requires recognizing development as a contested political space. Effective LGU engagement should not dilute the transformative potential of community-driven development but should institutionalize its gains within local governance systems. Institutionalizing community consultations, strengthening CSO accreditation, building capacities, and establishing participatory monitoring and accountability frameworks are key to effective collaborative governance. Current policies recognize CSO participation, but gaps in representation and meaningful engagement persist. By implementing these measures, local governments can transform CSOs and communities from passive observers into active partners, ensuring that development initiatives are inclusive, equitable, and responsive to local needs. Functional participatory platforms empower citizens and civil society to influence planning, decision-making, and project implementation, fostering transparency, accountability, and sustainable community-driven development outcomes.

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