



Community Participation and Local Governance Practices in Coastal Municipalities: Perspectives from Residents and Local Government Personnel in Divilacan, Isabela

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative phenomenological study explored community participation and local governance practices in the coastal municipality of Divilacan, Isabela from the perspectives of residents and local government personnel. The study examined stakeholders' experiences regarding citizen participation, governance processes, public service delivery, and community engagement within the local governance system. Data were gathered through semi-structured in-depth interviews with fifteen purposively selected participants composed of community residents and local government personnel. Thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's framework was employed in analyzing the data. Findings revealed that community participation was evident through barangay consultations, community-based programs, environmental activities, and collaborative decision-making initiatives. Participants also identified governance challenges related to limited resources, geographic isolation, communication barriers, and inconsistent community involvement. Despite these concerns, local government personnel and residents demonstrated collective commitment through participatory governance practices, community cooperation, and localized problem-solving initiatives. Participants emphasized that transparency, accessibility of local leaders, and active community engagement strengthened public trust and governance effectiveness. The findings underscore the importance of participatory governance, community empowerment, and collaborative leadership in improving local governance practices in coastal municipalities. The study highlights the need for strengthened community participation mechanisms, institutional support systems, and sustainable governance programs responsive to coastal community realities.

Keywords: community participation, local governance, coastal municipalities, participatory governance, public service, qualitative research, community engagement

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I. INTRODUCTION

Community participation is widely recognized as an essential component of effective local governance and democratic public administration. In local government settings, citizen participation strengthens transparency, accountability, public trust, and collaborative decision-making processes. Participatory governance enables communities to actively engage in identifying local concerns, shaping development priorities, and contributing to the implementation of programs and policies that directly affect their lives.

In coastal municipalities, local governance involves unique administrative and developmental challenges associated with geographic isolation, environmental vulnerability, limited accessibility, and resource management concerns. Coastal communities often depend on strong coordination between local government units and residents in addressing issues related to livelihood, disaster preparedness, environmental protection, and delivery of essential public services. Consequently, community participation becomes crucial in sustaining responsive and inclusive governance practices.

Divilacan, Isabela, as a coastal municipality, presents a distinctive governance context characterized by geographically dispersed communities and evolving local development needs. Local government personnel and community residents continuously interact in implementing community programs, governance initiatives, and public service activities. Understanding how stakeholders perceive community participation and governance practices is essential in strengthening local governance systems and improving citizen engagement.

Existing studies on local governance commonly focus on policy implementation, administrative effectiveness, and governance indicators using quantitative approaches. However, limited qualitative investigations examine the lived experiences and perspectives of both residents and local government personnel regarding participatory governance practices in coastal municipalities. Exploring these experiences provides deeper insights into the social, relational, and institutional dimensions of local governance.

This study explored community participation and local governance practices in Divilacan, Isabela from the perspectives of residents and local government personnel. Specifically, it examined stakeholders' experiences regarding community involvement, governance processes, collaborative practices, and challenges affecting participatory local governance in the municipality.

Objectives of the Study

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This study aimed to:

1. Explore community participation practices in the municipality of Divilacan, Isabela;
2. Examine local governance experiences and challenges among residents and local government personnel; and
3. Identify collaborative governance practices that strengthen community engagement and public service delivery.

Review of Related Literature

Community participation strengthens democratic governance by promoting citizen involvement in local decision-making and public service processes. According to Arnstein (1969), participatory governance empowers communities by enabling citizens to influence policies, programs, and development initiatives affecting their localities. Effective community participation contributes to transparency, accountability, and stronger government-community relationships.

In coastal municipalities, participatory governance is particularly important in addressing environmental, economic, and social concerns. Agrawal and Ribot (2020) emphasized that community involvement improves local governance effectiveness by encouraging collaborative problem-solving and shared responsibility in managing local resources and public services.

Studies by Brillantes and Fernandez (2019) further explained that Philippine local governance is strengthened through community consultations, barangay participation, and collaborative public administration practices. However, challenges such as limited resources, weak communication systems, and inconsistent citizen engagement continue to affect governance processes in geographically isolated communities.

Theoretical Framework

The study was anchored on Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation (1969), which explains varying levels of citizen involvement in governance and decision-making processes. The theory emphasizes meaningful participation, shared responsibility, and citizen empowerment in democratic governance.

The study also utilized Participatory Governance Theory, which highlights collaboration between government institutions and community stakeholders in promoting inclusive governance, transparency, and collective decision-making.

These theories guided the exploration of community participation and governance practices in the municipality of Divilacan, Isabela.



Methodology

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences and perspectives of residents and local government personnel regarding community participation and local governance practices in Divilacan, Isabela. Phenomenology was appropriate because it enabled the researcher to understand participants' perceptions, experiences, and interpretations of governance processes and community engagement within their local context.

The study was conducted in the municipality of Divilacan, Isabela, Philippines. Participants consisted of fifteen purposively selected individuals composed of community residents and local government personnel. Inclusion criteria required participants to: (1) reside or work in Divilacan, Isabela; (2) actively participate in community or governance-related activities; and (3) be willing to share their experiences and perspectives regarding local governance practices.

Data were gathered through semi-structured in-depth interviews focusing on community participation experiences, governance processes, public service delivery, collaborative activities, and governance-related challenges. Ethical considerations including informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation were strictly observed throughout the study.

The gathered data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework. Interview transcripts were coded and categorized to identify recurring patterns, meanings, and themes related to participatory governance and community engagement. Trustworthiness was established through member checking, triangulation, audit trails, and thick description.

Results and Findings

Theme 1: Strengthening Community Participation Through Barangay and Municipal Engagement

Participants described community participation as highly visible during barangay assemblies, consultations, environmental programs, and municipal development activities. Residents emphasized that participation in community meetings and local activities allowed them to express concerns and contribute ideas regarding local governance and development.

One resident shared:

"Kapag may barangay assembly, nagkakaroon kami ng pagkakataon na maipahayag ang concerns namin sa community."

Another participant stated:

"Importante ang participation kasi mas naririnig ng local government ang pangangailangan ng mga tao."

Local government personnel also emphasized that community involvement improved program

implementation and strengthened public cooperation during governance activities.

The findings suggest that participatory mechanisms strengthen communication, collaboration, and public involvement in local governance processes.

Theme 2: Experiencing Governance Challenges in a Geographically Isolated Coastal Municipality

Participants identified governance challenges associated with geographic isolation, transportation limitations, communication barriers, and limited institutional resources. Residents explained that accessing government services and participating in municipal activities sometimes became difficult due to distance and transportation constraints.

One participant explained:

"Minsan mahirap pumunta sa municipal office lalo na kapag masama ang panahon o kulang ang biyahe."

Another participant remarked:

"May mga programs na hindi agad naaabot ang ibang barangay dahil sa layo."

Local government personnel likewise emphasized logistical and resource-related difficulties in implementing programs and delivering services across geographically dispersed communities.

The findings indicate that geographic and resource limitations significantly influence governance processes and community participation in coastal municipalities.

Theme 3: Building Public Trust Through Accessible and Responsive Leadership

Participants emphasized that accessible leadership, transparency, and responsiveness strengthened community trust and participation. Residents appreciated local officials who actively communicated with community members and responded to local concerns promptly.

One participant shared:

"Mas nagtitiwala kami kapag nakikita naming approachable at responsive ang mga leaders."

Another resident stated:

"Kapag malinaw ang communication at may transparency, mas willing makiisa ang mga tao."

Local government personnel also viewed community trust as essential in promoting cooperation and successful implementation of local programs.

The findings suggest that transparent and people-centered leadership practices strengthen participatory governance and public confidence in local institutions.

Theme 4: Promoting Collective Responsibility Through Collaborative Community Programs

Participants described collaborative governance practices such as environmental clean-up drives, disaster preparedness activities, livelihood programs, and community-based projects that encouraged collective responsibility among residents and local officials.



One participant explained:

“Kapag sama-sama ang community at local government, mas nagiging successful ang projects.”

Another participant remarked:

“Malaki ang tulong ng cooperation para mas mabilis maresolba ang mga problema sa barangay.”

Participants emphasized that collaborative participation fostered stronger social relationships, shared accountability, and community solidarity.

The findings highlight the importance of collaborative governance and collective action in addressing local concerns and improving public service delivery.

Discussion

The findings revealed that community participation and local governance practices in Divilacan, Isabela are shaped by collaborative engagement, participatory leadership, and community-centered governance initiatives. Barangay consultations, public assemblies, and collaborative programs strengthened communication and public involvement in local governance processes.

Despite these positive practices, governance challenges associated with geographic isolation, transportation limitations, communication barriers, and limited institutional resources continue to affect public service delivery and citizen participation. Nevertheless, residents and local government personnel demonstrated collective commitment through cooperative governance practices and community-based problem-solving initiatives.

The study further highlights the importance of transparent leadership, accessible governance structures, and collaborative public participation in strengthening trust, accountability, and governance effectiveness in coastal municipalities.

Conclusion

The study concluded that community participation and local governance practices in Divilacan, Isabela are strengthened through participatory engagement, collaborative leadership, and community-centered governance initiatives. Residents and local government personnel actively participated in barangay consultations, community programs, and local development activities that promoted collective responsibility and public involvement. However, governance challenges related to geographic isolation, limited resources, and communication barriers continue to affect governance efficiency and citizen participation. Despite these difficulties, collaborative governance practices, responsive leadership, and community cooperation contributed positively to local governance effectiveness and public trust.

The findings underscore the importance of participatory governance mechanisms, institutional support systems, and community empowerment initiatives in strengthening

governance practices in coastal municipalities.

Implications of the Study

The findings may guide local government administrators, policymakers, and community leaders in strengthening participatory governance mechanisms, community consultation programs, and collaborative development initiatives in coastal municipalities. Local government units may also improve communication systems, accessibility of public services, and community-based governance activities to enhance citizen participation.

The study further highlights the importance of transparent leadership, collaborative public administration, and inclusive governance practices in promoting sustainable local development and stronger government-community relationships.

Future studies may further examine participatory governance practices across other coastal municipalities and geographically isolated communities in the Philippines.

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