

# Local Governance Initiatives, Practices, and Challenges for Poverty Alleviation Amidst Covid-19 Pandemic in the Province of Bukidnon

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## ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has claimed over 6.9 million lives globally and infected more than 768 million people as of October 2023. In the Philippines, the pandemic significantly impacted poverty rates, which rose to 23.7 percent in the first half of 2021 from 21.1 percent in 2018, resulting in an additional 3.9 million Filipinos living in poverty. This study examines the initiatives implemented by local government officials to address poverty alleviation during the pandemic, identifies local good governance practices, and investigates challenges encountered in the process. The research employed qualitative methodologies including in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and thematic analysis to examine the experiences of selected barangay officials in Bukidnon Province. The findings reveal that local government unit (LGUs) poverty alleviation initiatives can be categorized into three primary themes: socioeconomic support measures, health intervention programs, and public-private sector partnerships. The study highlights that collaboration between LGUs and private sector entities proved crucial in addressing community poverty during the crisis. Notably, barangay governments successfully implemented strategic approaches by utilizing previously unallocated calamity funds from prior fiscal years. However, significant challenges emerged, including problems with equitable aid distribution, COVID-19 infections among barangay officials, difficulties enforcing health protocols, and limited healthcare facility accessibility. The research demonstrates that effective poverty alleviation during crises requires integrated approaches addressing both socioeconomic and health concerns, areas that require focused attention from policymakers. The study recommends that LGUs adopt proactive governance by establishing dedicated contingency funds, enhancing healthcare infrastructure at the barangay level, and strengthening collaborative relationships with private sector stakeholders within their jurisdictions to better prepare for and respond to future crises.

**Keywords:** LGU initiatives, Local governments, poverty alleviation, pandemic

## INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 has claimed around 3 million people and infected close to 140 million people (WHO, 2022). In the Philippines, it has substantially affected poverty as one of the first countries to be hit by the virus, with the president enacting lockdown measures in mid-March 2020. According to the Philippine Statistics Authority or PSA in 2020, the lockdowns in order to contain the spread of the virus have caused a substantial decline in the job market. In fact, the unemployment rate was around 5% before the start of the pandemic, but it increased to 17.6% in April 2020. With this, the population's poverty rate rose to 23.7 percent in the first half of 2021, up from 21.1 percent in the same time last year. Thus, the figure equates to an additional 3.9 million Filipinos living in poverty (PSA, 2020).

There are various studies that document the myriad policies that the LGUs implemented during the pandemic. LGUs employed strict border controls, quick lockdowns, the construction of quarantine facilities, excellent public relations, and monitoring efforts were the key elements that enabled these LGUs to lessen the pandemic's

negative effects (Talabis et al. 2021). In the Mountain Province, organized a localized KADIWA called Sustainable Sagada, the localized SURE Loan Version by Paracelis, Sadanga's Food Security Contingency Plan, Assistance and Involvement of Women Organizations, and Encouragement of Youth Participation (Tafaleng-Ullalim, 2022).

The study of Bajar and Porsche-Ludwig (2021) explored insights from the province, city, and municipality regarding the local e-governance methods. There are also studies investigating whether healthcare workers are satisfied with the LGU's Management Support System (Anilao & Cali, 2021), and the implications of the strategies made by the LGUs to the Philippine health devolution (Lumintao, 2021). The paper of Duya (2021) looks into the process of interactions in the planning and implementation of the LGUs' community response strategy against COVID-19. In the study of Alampay, delos Santos, and Rye (2021), they examine tensions between local and national policies in the context of the decentralization of healthcare services. This study is an attempt to look into the initiatives of the LGUs within the purview of poverty alleviation using the experiences of barangay officials as responders during the pandemic.

## Review of Related Literature

### Initiatives of Local Government Units

There are several initiatives implemented by the LGUs during the pandemic. It includes strict border controls, quick lockdowns, the construction of quarantine facilities, excellent public relations, and monitoring efforts were the key elements that enabled these LGUs to lessen the pandemic's negative effects (Talabis et al. 2021). Also, Makati City's Mayor Abigail Binay discussed how Makati City, the richest city in the country, has embraced technology to safely and effectively disperse various forms of financial aid using the Makatizen Card and the Makatizen App (UPLB, 2020). In the economic aspects, the African Swine Flu, a lack of farm inputs, rotting and overproduction of crops, and income loss all negatively impacted Mountain Province farmers. The LGUs of the Mountain Province worked together with other worried organizations to address these issues through the various national agricultural programs. The LGUs of the Mountain Province took a number of actions to maintain order by ensuring a consistent food supply. These include the Localized KADIWA called Sustainable Sagada, the Localized SURE Loan Version by Paracelis, Sadanga's Food Security Contingency Plan, Assistance and Involvement of Women Organizations, and Encouragement of Youth Participation. Building on the knowledge gained from the agricultural responses to the pandemic, suitable policies to support resilience and sustainability are developed (Tafaleng-Ullalim, 2022).

Moreover, throughout the many LGU levels, including insights from the province, city, and municipality, there were local e-governance methods. LGUs displayed prioritization, adoption, and escalation in executing their dual roles as public administrators and information producers. However, despite the fact that they have not yet suggestively perfected the skill of media reporting, LGUs deserve equally profound recognition for their admirable efforts and their advancements in digital technologies, which may serve as benchmark data for future similar undertakings and possibly policies (Bajar & Porsche-Ludwig, 2021). On the issues of health during the pandemic, the study of tracer Anilao and Cali (2021) investigates whether healthcare workers are satisfied with the LGU's Management Support System. They argued that with the change, sentiments that healthcare employees perceive are mixed, ranging from negative to pleasant feelings. The majority of developed themes, however, are viewed negatively. These include those pertaining to contact tracers, recycled PPE, silent war, discrimination against nurses, treating them like puppets and robots, and fear of COVID-19 spreading to their families, and treating them like puppets and robots (Anilao & Cali, 2021).

Significantly, the cooperation and coordination of various players and stakeholders within and outside the government are essential to the implementation of the initiatives during the pandemic. The paper of Duya (2021) looks into the process of interactions in the planning and implementation of the LGUs' community response strategy against COVID-19. Their findings emphasize the significance of developing synergistic actions in the governmental and extra-governmental systems in order to address significant problems in the community, using Shankardass, et al. published in 2018 through the Health in All Policies Systems Framework. Additionally, it underlines the necessity of coordinating LGU programs and projects in order to guarantee the efficiency and durability of their local community engagement even beyond the pandemic

(Duya, 2021).

### **Best Practices Recoded from Other LGUs**

With all the initiatives implemented by the LGUs, there are those that were exemplified during the pandemic. Among the examples cited by the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction or UNDRR (2020) is Indonesia's Governor of Central Java, Ganjar Pranowo, who, since the beginning of the epidemic, has personally used social media to communicate with the public in order to offer current information, guarantee preventative measures are pushed, and ensure understanding. Anies Baswedan, the governor of Jakarta, called on the private sector to permit employees to work from home early on so they wouldn't feel obligated to come into the workplace (UNDRR, 2020). According to NEDA Region IX, distributing vegetable seedlings and a variety of vegetable seeds is a good idea to promote backyard cultivation during this quarantine. The City Agriculture Office in Isabela, Basilan, engages in this technique. In addition to strengthening family ties, home gardening will give the family access to fresh veggies for wholesome meals (NEDA Region IX, n.d.).

Moreover, to protect the security of their constituents and the effective provision of services, the LGUs established and put into practice rigorous and useful activities. They also provided financial and non-financial help to stop the spread of the virus. The provision of food and other necessities within their separate jurisdictions, transportation and lodging places for medical frontline workers, curfew and checkpoints, and similar initiatives are the LGUs' most popular projects and activities (NTRC Tax Research Journal, 2020). This study by Siar and Lorenzo (2022) examined the communication tactics LGUs employed in the years 2020–2021 to inform, educate, and interact with the public throughout the epidemic. Their research demonstrated how conventional and contemporary communication channels are used for risk and crisis communication. Given the necessity for social separation and mobility limits, modern channels including social media, virtual meetings and groups, and online messaging platforms were widely employed (Siar & Lorenzo, 2022).

### **Challenges Faced by LGUs During Pandemic**

In the end, the initiatives and actions implemented by the LGUs during the pandemic are not possible without challenges. According to Payot et al. (2021), the government's initiatives and adaptable measures have various shortcomings and difficulties. Because everyone is still getting used to the new regulations and adjustments brought on by the epidemic, tensions and miscommunications among the cops have led to a chaotic environment that has trickled down to the community. Conflicts develop as a result of unemployment and restricted access to products and services (Payot et al., 2021). Also, although there are budgetary constraints such as the absence of disinfection and quarantine equipment and facilities, the majority of options described for dealing with the infectious coronavirus prioritized health and sanitation. Additionally, the majority of members need assistance with basic requirements. Due to these restrictions, there were tensions among the local authorities (Payot et al., 2021).

Ultimately, the absence of medical facilities is most noticeable during pandemics. During this global health crisis, the financing gap between the expense of health services and activities that have been devolved to the LGUs becomes obvious (Lumintao, 2021). This is related to the study of Alampay, delos Santos, and Rye (2021) which examines local and national policies, as well as the conflicts and synergies that exist between them, and how these outcomes affect the nation's health as well as the decentralization of healthcare services, health funding, and interoperability of health information systems. There were times throughout the epidemic when LGUs responded to constituent demands in a proactive manner, sometimes even before the national government. The pandemic amplified this intersectoral or multidisciplinary character even further. After the pandemic, the repercussions of inadequate Health Information System interoperability affected the whole government (LGUs and other national government branches, such as DTI, DILG, and DOT), not only the health sector (Alampay, delos Santos & Rye, 2021).

## **Objectives**

This study aimed to investigate the initiatives of the LGUs within the purview of poverty alleviation using the experiences of barangay officials as responders during the pandemic. It was achieved using the following objectives:

1. To determine the initiatives of the local government officials to address poverty alleviation amidst the COVID-19 pandemic;
2. To determine the local good governance practices local government officials to address poverty alleviation amidst the COVID-19 pandemic; and
3. To determine the challenges encountered by local government officials during the pandemic.

## **METHODOLOGY**

**Research Design:** The orientation of this research was qualitative. It is because an interview guide containing questions related to the objectives was prepared and offered to the respondents to determine their viewpoints through a focused group discussion and in-depth interview. The study utilized the responses of the barangay officials during the interview as the data to attain the objectives. Also, the study used a descriptive design because the data was interpreted in a way that describes the experiences of the barangay officials in their participation as government officials during the pandemic.

**Study Site:** The study was conducted in the selected local governments, particularly those barangays with high poverty incidence in the province of Bukidnon.

**Sampling:** The respondents are chosen through purposive sampling since respondents should be knowledgeable of the processes and issues encountered by the local government units and have initiated poverty alleviation actions to mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, the respondents of the study were the barangay officials of local government units of Bukidnon and front liners during the pandemic.

**Data Gathering:** The data of this study was gathered using in-depth interviews and focus group discussion, a survey method with close-ended and open-ended questionnaires. There was also an interview guide that facilitated the researcher in gathering the necessary data for the study.

**Data Analysis:** Since the study is qualitative in design, data were analyzed through thematic analysis and descriptive methods. It is thematic because the data from the field were collected by the researcher in such a way that recurring but relevant themes from the respondents of the different LGUs were documented. Unique themes from the field were also considered.

**Ethical Considerations:** Before gathering the actual data, the study underwent review by the Research Ethics Committee (REC) of Central Mindanao University and an entry protocol was employed in the chosen area of study. The respondents were informed about the objectives of the research and the time and place of the Focus Group Discussion (FGD). The respondents were assured that their participation in the research study would be voluntary and data gathered would be treated with utmost confidentiality.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

**Initiatives of the Local Government Officials to Address Poverty Alleviation during COVID-19 Pandemic**  
Based on Table 1, the initiatives of the local government officials to address poverty alleviation can be divided into three broad themes. These are initiatives that support the socio-economic issues faced by the residents, support health problems, and collaboration between the LGU officials and private sectors within the barangay.

**Table 1 Presentation of the Initiatives of the Local Government Officials to Address Poverty Alleviation during COVID-19 Pandemic**

<b>Initiatives</b>	<b>Specific Actions from LGUs</b>	<b>Description</b>
	Giving of Cash and Relief Goods Subsidies	The LGUs facilitated the distribution of the Ayuda or aid (cash, rice, and relief goods) coming from the provincial, cities, and municipalities to the residents of the barangays regardless of the social status since all residents were affected during the pandemic.
Support to Socioeconomic issues	Realignment of Local Calamity Fund from 2015-2019 as Emergency Fund for COVID-19 Pandemic	The LGUs provided goods such as rice and canned goods or packages of groceries as counterparts for the aid provided by the national, provincial, cities, and municipalities, where the source of funds from the unused budget of DRRM for quick response.
	Express Lanes for Farm Products	Farm products were given express lanes intended for goods at the barangay level by the officials.
	Social and Physical Distancing Policies	As government officials, barangay officials strictly monitored the people coming in and going outside the locality through the local checkpoints and implemented strict compliance to prevent the contamination of the virus and minimize the casualties.
Support to Health Issues		The checkpoint was implemented to reduce the movement of people within the barangay.
	Assigned areas in the barangay as quarantine areas for people who are contaminated with the virus.	The barangay officials help in implementing quarantine protocols since the involvement of the barangay health workers coordinated with the city and municipal officials in the event that there are positive cases of COVID-19 in the barangay.



	Since the quarantine facilities in the cities and municipalities are full, the barangay officials have to put up their own quarantine facilities for people who are contaminated with viruses that are not serious.
Assigned receiving areas for incoming residents coming from other places	To prevent the spread of viruses in their locality, barangay officials strictly prohibit the entry of people residents coming outside the province without being quarantined for 14-21 days. They only allowed them to go outside the barangay as long as they had the certificate and required them to wear their mask.
Encourage the residents to be vaccinated to reduce the casualties of COVID-19 virus	It was difficult to convince the people to be vaccinated so to encourage them, the barangay officials initiated being vaccinated first so as to reduce the fear of the people about being vaccinated and beliefs that the vaccination will lead to their death.
Formation of Barangay Health Search and Rescue Team	The barangay organized teams were responsible for the monitoring and implementation of policies and programs to contain the spread of the virus and its effects.
Information Drive through Social Media Accounts, text brigade, and Megaphone	The LGUs and residents posted information about the programs of the government Bayanihan II (Reducing the Adverse Impact of Health and Economic Effects of COVID-19 Pandemic
The partnership of SUMIFRU and DOLE (Private Companies)	<p>According to the barangay officials, there was the presence of the SUMIFRU and DOLE companies in their locality. They were tapped by the barangay officials to hire the locals to work and earn money to support the needs of their families. They are quick to accommodate as long as the residents apply for jobs and are endorsed by the barangay officials.</p> <p>The barangay officials partnered with SUMIFRU and DOLE for a scale business partnership to help the constituents and barangays increase revenue. Further, the soap-making livelihood program, loans, rice production, and butchering served a</p> <p>generate income for the residents as well as for the barangay.</p>
Partnership with the Private Sector	
Distribution of Vitamins especially for Senior Citizens and Children who are vulnerable to COVID-19	The private sector and NGOs distributed vitamin donated vitamins to senior citizens and children.
Soap Making, sewing skills program from NGO	There was a soap-making program for the women's association and youth sector. It provided technical skills and training to increase their life skills, promote

	entrepreneurship, and create linkages to markets”
Assistance from KALAH NGO	The Gawad-Kalinga helps in the distribution of electric fans and tents in the  _____ quarantine facilities.

**Support Program to Socio-economic Issues.** Based on the interviews, the initiatives implemented by the local government officials toward poverty alleviation during the pandemic are based on national, city, and provincial directives. The program's legal provision, as stated in Republic Act 8425 or the Social Reform and Poverty Alleviation Act. It offers policies based on the principles of “adopt an area-based, sectoral and focused intervention to poverty alleviation,” emphasizing that the war against poverty which is a priority of national and local administration requires the participation of various sectors in government and non-governmental organizations.

Moreover, during the pandemic the administration of the President Rodrigo Duterte implemented the 4-Pillar Socio-Economic Strategy Against COVID-19 with according the following pillars: 1) Emergency Support for Vulnerable Groups, which is an emergency support for poor and low-income households, small business employees, and other vulnerable groups through various assistance programs and wage subsidies; 2) Marshalling Resources to fight against COVID-19-Expanded medical resources to fight COVID-19 and ensure the safety of frontlines health insurance coverage for all COVID- 19 patients; special risk allowance, hazard pay, and personal protective equipment (PPE) for frontline health workers; increased testing capacity; etc.); 3 monetary action and other financing support- Monetary actions to keep the economy afloat and other financing support for emergency response and recovery initiatives; 4) An Economic recovery program to create jobs and sustain growth which is an economic recovery program to create jobs and sustain growth, including Bayanihan II.

In the barangays that are part of Malaybalay City with high poverty of incidence (Malaybalay Survey System, 2020), such as Barangay Cabangahan, there are 506 or (61%) households out of 826 households are living below the poverty threshold; For Barangay Laguitas, 537 households out of 849 households are living below the poverty threshold; Magsaysay has 433 or 53% out of 811 households are living below the poverty threshold. In these localities, the local governments were able to implement the national poverty reduction strategy granting cash and employment assistance to poor or near-poor families.

Ultimately, the most noticeable initiatives from LGUs as they strive to alleviate poverty during the pandemic are giving of cash and relief goods subsidies, realignment of the Local Calamity Fund from 2015-2019 as Emergency Fund for COVID-19

**Pandemic and Express Lanes for Farm Products.** As the national government sought to address the poverty issues during the pandemic with a Keynesian economic style, the LGUs facilitated the distribution of the Ayuda or aid (cash, rice, and relief goods) coming from the provincial, cities, and municipalities to the residents of the barangays regardless of the social status since all residents were affected during the pandemic. The findings revealed that LGUs, particularly the barangay officials were instrumental in the distribution of monetary aid coming from the national government. The findings support the idea of Duya (2021) which emphasized that the cooperation and coordination of various players and stakeholders within and outside the government are essential to the implementation of the initiatives during the pandemic. There is a necessity to coordinate with the LGU programs and projects in order to guarantee the efficiency and durability of their local community engagement even beyond the pandemic (Duya, 2021). Thus, it is evident that in order for the national government to be successful in its goal to address issues of poverty during the pandemic, the LGUs are seen as vital coming with mechanisms to bring these aspects to the citizens.

Moreover, the LGUs provided goods such as rice and canned goods or packages of groceries as counterparts for the aid provided by the national, provincial, cities, and municipalities, where the source of funds from the unused budget of DRRM for quick response. Also, for those citizens whose source of income is farming, the transportation of their products was not stopped because they were given express lanes intended for goods at

the barangay level by the officials. The barangay officials serve as a bridge for the people to sell their farm products to the market every Friday during the pandemic making it accessible despite the lockdown.

These findings revealed that although LGUs implemented strict regulations border controls and quarantine measures during the pandemic as documented by the study of Talabis et al (2021), they also cater to the needs of the farmers who rely on farm products as their source of income. The Province of Bukidnon as the agricultural area in Northern Mindanao continued their economic activities in terms of producing and selling farm products. In a report by the Philippine Statistics Authority released in December 2021, the province recorded a 1.0 percent expansion in its economy. It was noted in the report that the main drivers for its growth were agriculture, forestry, and fishing which grew by 2.9 percent, among other sectors (PSA, 2021).

**Support Program to Health Issues.** During the pandemic, the concerned residents and representatives of the barangays made information through text and posting on social media for people to be aware of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Barangay Health Workers and barangay officials directed that the residents will strictly follow the health protocols. According to the residents, if there is somebody who gets sick in the barangay, the local officials will rescue them and put them in quarantine where there is close monitoring. The barangay had a checkpoint and provided footbath, and hand wash for residents who entered and went outside the premises of the barangay. They even provided rescue vehicles for those who got sick and sent them to hospitals for patients who had serious illnesses during the pandemic. These efforts from the barangays of Magsaysay, Laguitas, and Cabangahan meet pillar 2 which is marshaling resources to fight against COVID-19- that ensures the safety of frontlines health insurance coverage for all COVID-19 patients; special risk allowance, hazard pay, and personal protective equipment (PPE) for frontline health workers; increased testing capacity; of the Marshalling Resources to fight against COVID-19.

In health concerns, as shown in Table 1, the barangays strictly implemented the directives of the national mandate to implement the restrictions for health protocols. The barangay officials themselves strictly monitored the people coming in and going outside the locality through the local checkpoints and implemented strict compliance to prevent the contamination of the virus and minimize the casualties. The checkpoints led by the barangay officials other their functionaries were implemented to reduce the movement of people within the barangay. The barangay officials designated areas in the barangay as quarantine areas for people who are contaminated with the virus. They have also designated areas as receiving places for incoming residents coming from different places outside the barangay. To campaign for the national vaccination, it is the barangay officials particularly the Punong barangay who initiated to be vaccinated first so as to reduce the fear of the people about from being vaccinated and beliefs that the vaccination will lead to their death. The barangay officials were helpful in implementing quarantine protocols since they coordinated with the barangay health workers, communicating with the city and municipal officials in the event that there are prospective positive cases of COVID-19 in the barangay. According to one of the respondents, there was strict implementation of quarantines for those individuals coming into the barangay, and for those who have experienced symptoms and have been exposed to persons with COVID- 19 and extensive monitoring through numerous checkpoints.

These findings on the support to health issues support the results of the study conducted by Talabis et al (2021), which suggest local autonomy among LGU officials in initiating rules for the welfare of their constituents. Also, the findings corroborate the report of UPLB (2020) on the technology-driven mechanisms of the LGU of Makati City to disseminate information regarding health protocols. This is also supporting the observation of Bajar and Porsche-Ludwig (2021) on the use of digital technologies in public governance.

**Partnerships with Private Sectors.** The barangays of Cabangahan, Laguitas and Magsaysay also made a partnership with private establishments and non-governmental organizations. The non-governmental organizations created empowerment programs supporting the marginalized groups in the communities such as lending for soap making, and livelihood. The soap making was implemented to support women's association's livelihood and youth sectors providing them with technical skills and training to increase their life skills, promote entrepreneurship, and linkage to markets. These findings are related to the study of Tafaleng-Ullalim (2022), which states that the LGUs of the Mountain Province worked together with other worried organizations to address these issues through the various national agricultural programs.



The partnership of the private sector and barangay officials plays a crucial role in reducing poverty in the barangay through well-coordinated collaborative efforts that generate employment opportunities, ensure access to finance through loan programs, provide resources for infrastructure development, and support various empowerment programs.

### **Local Good Governance Practices During the Pandemic**

In the majority, the local government has been an implementer of national health protocols and socio-economic protection directives. As they implemented initiatives to address the poverty issues during the pandemic, there are actions from the LGUs that are significantly classified as best practices. The best practices in this research are initiatives that are proven to lead to optimal efficiency and results.

**Budget realignment:** This initiative of the LGUs is considered a best practice because it aided the barangay level in providing relief goods to their constituent during the pandemic. It was recorded that the barangay realigned the budget from 2016 to 2020. By doing so, the barangay officials covered in the study made a resolution to realign their local calamity to fund as emergency fund assistance for the COVID-19 pandemic. This was instrumental in sustaining the needs of the people due to the lockdown of the establishment and restriction on physical movements of the people for health protocols.

As a result of the realignment of budget, the LGUs provided financial assistance to their residents, during the COVID-19 pandemic where the beneficiaries were those most affected and lost their jobs because of the lockdown. In economic aspects, the barangay officials provided goods such as rice and canned goods as counterparts for the aid provided by the city and national government where the source of funds is the DRRM from the 2015-2018 unused budget for quick response. Some of the barangay officials in Lurugan and Kisanday highlighted that since there was no calamity experience from 2015-2018, the budget was kept and utilized during the pandemic.

**Partnership from the private sector within the vicinity of the barangay.** The help extended by the private sector was very helpful in mitigating the effects caused by the pandemic. Also, the private companies were instrumental in campaigning for vaccination because they have implemented rules within their corporations. They did not allow their employee to go back to work unless they were vaccinated.

### **Challenges Encountered by The Local Government Officials During the Pandemic**

COVID-19 is one of the greatest repudiations of the 21st century as it has impaired governments politically and economically. While national governments were heavily stricken, the local governments were knocked down having little knowledge, skill, and finances to deal with the virus and its perils. The challenges were explained as follows:

**Issues on the distribution of Monetary aid.** The problems encountered during the pandemic were tried to resolve under the welfare policy package by the national government. However, it became another challenge for the LGUs. For example, the cash assistance schemes of the national government such as 4Ps and UTI were backlashed because of the poor and inconsistent survey. There were issues when it came to identifying the deserving beneficiaries. The barangay officials stressed that it is the barangay officials who can best determine the appropriate residents and their purok presidents. However, it is the personnel from CSWD and their list of beneficiaries were followed which caused commotion between the residents and the barangay officials. The main issue is that the problems or irregularities in the distribution of SAP are blamed on the barangay officials. Some were even excluded from the list that qualified as lawful beneficiaries.

Also, based on the interviews, the main culprit found was the usage of an old census. Informants revealed that the instructions given to the DSWD were that to use the 2015 census to primarily identify the beneficiaries. Now, much of this list was already untrue four years after the pandemic hit the country. Many of the names listed have already deceased or have migrated to another place, or have improved living conditions. More so, the growing population of the vulnerable sector has already spiked rendering the old census unreliable.

**Barangay Officials Contracted by the Virus.** Another notable challenge faced was the limited but also vulnerable LGU officials. Informants revealed that while doing their job as public servants, they were also contracted by the virus. The punong barangay tested positive of the virus and the driver of the barangay for one of their rescue vehicles got positive and died. Public service delivery was very challenging especially that public servants were also vulnerable to the virus.

**Implementation of Health Protocols.** During the implementation of health protocols mandated by the national government, there was resistance from the residents to follow the standards. It was revealed during the focused-group discussion that the residents of the barangays have difficulty absorbing and understanding the risks of the virus. One notable reason found was that these people would rather die of the virus than be kept inside and die of hunger. Many of these residents live in “isang kahig, isang tuka (daily wage, daily food)”; obviously, because of the lockdown they have lost their everyday source of food. Thus, the agitation. In addition, they also have not fully comprehended the risks of the virus and thought of self-medication by staying at home rather than being at a quarantine facility.

**Limited accessibility to Health facilities.** The rural Health Centers were not equipped with basic medicines and vitamins. This is a very common challenge to the LGUs during the pandemic. This finding supported the study of Lumintao (2021) in the Province of Bukidnon regarding the issue of the limited medical equipment that was essential in responding to health problems during the pandemic.

## CONCLUSION

This study examined how Local Government Unit (LGU) officials in Bukidnon Province addressed poverty challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. When the Philippines declared a public health emergency through Proclamation No. 922 in March 2020, LGU officials became frontline responders managing the crisis at the community level. Within the country's decentralized governance structure, local governments implemented diverse policies alongside national response measures, with particular emphasis on addressing socioeconomic issues affecting citizens' livelihoods and well-being.

Through interviews and focus group discussions, this research revealed that local government poverty alleviation initiatives during the pandemic encompassed three primary themes: socioeconomic support interventions, health-related assistance programs, and strategic partnerships with private sector entities. The collaboration between LGUs and private organizations emerged as particularly crucial for effective community poverty reduction. Notably, barangay governments demonstrated exceptional financial management by strategically utilizing their unused five percent (5%) calamity fund allocations. Since most barangays in Bukidnon Province had not experienced major disasters recently, these resources were available for reallocation during the pandemic, representing exemplary crisis management practices.

However, LGU officials encountered significant operational challenges that complicated their response efforts. Key obstacles included complications in monetary aid distribution, viral infections among staff members, difficulties implementing health protocols, and limited access to healthcare facilities. The most contentious issue involved distributing national government financial assistance, where administrative delays and unclear procedures created substantial conflicts between community members and local leaders.

While this study captured these critical governance dynamics and contributed significantly to understanding local emergency response and poverty alleviation, several limitations must be acknowledged. The geographic scope, limited to selected barangays in one province, constrains generalizability across diverse Philippine contexts. While the qualitative methodology yielded rich contextual insights into local experiences, incorporating quantitative measures would strengthen the evaluation of poverty reduction outcomes and program effectiveness. Despite these constraints, this research meaningfully advances understanding of local crisis response mechanisms and community resilience strategies, offering valuable grassroots perspectives frequently overlooked in national policy discourse.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and analysis of this study that documented the experiences of the barangay officials as they disposed of their duty as public servants during the pandemic. The following are specific policy recommendations for consideration by both local and national government agencies.

1. The LGUs particularly the barangay government shall allocate contingency funds for the future. Aside from their calamity funds, the barangay government shall allocate funds in the event that the country declares another public health emergency. In coming up with the funding, the barangay officials shall work with national government agencies and the different sectors in the community such as women, youth, and experts in public safety and security and disaster management. Together, they shall create a plan in times of public health emergency. Based on this plan, they shall come up with a budget allocation that will be the basis of their contingency funds. By doing so, LGUs and the community will become proactive if another pandemic arises or any calamity that may happen in the future.
2. The national government through the Department of Health shall improve the health facilities within the barangay level. This can be done in three ways: first is to allocate more funding in terms of purchasing more health equipment at the barangay level. The second, health workers who are currently struggling with the insufficient salary honorarium mostly provided by the national government. Some of the barangay functionaries who are designated as barangay health workers are receiving honoraria which do not conform to the provincial level minimum wage. Third, there shall be additional permanent health professionals such as Doctors and Nurses in the barangay. The functionaries as barangay health workers do not have as enough knowledge as doctors and nurses do, which is why they are also highly needed in the barangay level so that patients would no longer go to cities to seek immediate medical attention.
3. The barangay government shall strengthen its relationships or partnerships with the private sectors within their localities. It has been observed that the participation and involvement of the private sector during the pandemic was beneficial as they extend help to the community by providing the resources, they have available as the LGUs grappled with a meager budget. In doing so, the barangay government shall create a recognized organization intended for the coordination between the LGU and private companies and NGOs within the barangay.
4. Local Government Units (LGUs) are encouraged to establish systematic contingency planning frameworks, enhance digital infrastructure for transparent aid distribution monitoring, and strengthen local health systems while fostering sustained partnerships with private sector stakeholders to develop comprehensive and inclusive crisis response mechanisms.
5. Future research should integrate mixed-methods approaches that combine qualitative insights with quantitative measurements of poverty-related impacts, providing a more comprehensive understanding of policy effectiveness.
6. Future research should broaden its geographic coverage to analyze variations in Local Government Unit (LGU) response strategies and institutional capacities across diverse urban and rural environments, revealing context-specific factors that influence policy implementation.
7. Future studies should assess how emergency policies reshape local governance structures and influence communities' long-term capacity for resilience-building and adaptive response.

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