

EVALUATION BRIEF

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Empowering Governance: Insights from DSWD OGP-PAR

A Focus on Addressing Child Malnutrition and Early Pregnancy

Background

The Open Government Partnership (OGP) is a multilateral initiative that promotes transparency, accountability, and citizen engagement through national action plans (NAPs). In line with the 5th NAP, the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), with support from the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program National Program Management Office (4Ps NPMO), implemented the OGP-Participatory Action Research (OGP-PAR) project from 2019 to 2022. This project focused on addressing critical social issues like child malnutrition and early pregnancy in the Philippines through participatory action research (PAR).

The Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps) is a flagship social protection program in the Philippines aimed at combating intergenerational poverty through human capital investment. Despite its efforts, the 2018 third-wave impact evaluation study revealed that 4Ps children had higher rates of underweight and stunting compared to non-4Ps children. Malnutrition remains a significant concern, often disproportionately affecting women who are the primary caregivers of children. Additionally, early pregnancy, declared a national social emergency by the Philippine government, poses severe health risks to both mothers and children.

Through PAR, the DSWD aimed to engage communities in developing and implementing solutions to these issues. The OGP-PAR project was successfully implemented in Cabusao, Camarines Sur, and Roxas City, Capiz, involving partnerships, capacity-building activities, and the integration of co-created solutions into local action plans. The PAR approach empowered community participants to understand and address the issues, leading to transformative outcomes such as attitudinal and behavioral changes, intellectual empowerment, and increased involvement in decision-making processes.

This evaluation brief presents insights from the OGP-PAR final documentation report, discussing the project's design, objectives, implementation, outcomes, and recommendations for future research and initiatives within the DSWD.

Objectives, Design and Outputs of the OGP-PAR Project

Objectives

The OGP-PAR project utilized PAR as an approach to encourage co-creation of knowledge and empowerment of people. The project had the following objectives:

- (1) Identify and analyze the factors affecting nutritional and reproductive health concerns of children.
- (2) Formulate solutions to the identified nutritional and reproductive health concerns in the target communities.
- (3) Disseminate action plans and secure buy-ins from target end users.

Key take aways:

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a powerful tool for addressing social issues. The OGP-PAR project successfully utilized PAR to engage communities in identifying and addressing child malnutrition and early pregnancy. This approach empowered community members to co-create solutions and led to positive outcomes such as increased awareness and knowledge on emerging social issues.

Community engagement is crucial for sustainable development. The OGP-PAR project highlighted the importance of involving communities in the design and implementation of programs aimed at addressing social issues.

Collaboration between government, civil society, and communities is essential for effective governance. The OGP-PAR project demonstrated the power of collaboration between different stakeholders.

The OGP-PAR project has made significant contributions to advancing open government principles in the Philippines. The project has promoted transparency, accountability, and citizen participation in the decision-making process.

The OGP-PAR project provides valuable lessons for future initiatives aimed at addressing social issues. The project's success demonstrates the potential of PAR as a tool for social change. The lessons learned from this project can be used to inform the design and implementation of future initiatives aimed at addressing other social issues in the Philippines and beyond.

Project Design and Methodology

The project design utilized the PAR method to involve communities in activities that raise awareness, challenge beliefs, and empower them to develop solutions. The OGP-PAR project required involvement from multiple stakeholders to ensure the PAR approach achieved the intended project outputs and health outcomes. The specific design employed was community PAR (CPAR).

The project empowered traditionally marginalized groups by ensuring their voices were heard by duty-bearers. This inclusive approach fostered a deeper sense of partnership between grassroots communities and the government, enhancing both accessibility and responsiveness.

Figure 1. Design of PAR



Project Outputs

The project aimed to engage stakeholders in identifying and implementing solutions to these concerns. The implementing activities were expected to produce four major outputs:

Figure 2. Project Outputs

Instrumental Outputs	Terminal Outputs	Insights on Child Malnutrition and Early Pregnancy	Stakeholder Engagement
<ul style="list-style-type: none">•MOUs between government and civil society organizations•Training modules and session guides on PAR	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Community Action Plan•Packaged PAR Implementation Report	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Understanding the nature malnutrition and early pregnancy•Community conversations through OGP	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Townhall meetings•FGDs•Training of Trainers•Action Plans

Addressing the Objectives of PAR

Objective No. 1: Identify and analyze the factors affecting nutritional and reproductive health concerns of children.

Several themes were identified as factors influencing child malnutrition and early pregnancy. Themes for child malnutrition included economic and other resource constraints, lack of knowledge, parental factors, and feeding difficulties. For early pregnancy, common themes included early sexual engagement and premature life decisions, while uncommon themes included exposure to explicit materials, rebellious behavior, and limited social activities.



Factors Influencing Child Malnutrition

- » **Economic constraints**, due to poverty and unemployment, severely limit families' ability to purchase nutritious food, often leading to reliance on cheaper, less nutritious alternatives. Even with employment, low income and competing financial obligations can hinder adequate budget allocation for healthy food.
- » **Limited access to diverse and nutritious food** results in repetitive meals and potential nutritional deficiencies.
- » **Picky eating habits and feeding difficulties**, sometimes due to medical conditions or behavioral issues, can significantly affect a child's nutritional intake. Ensuring adequate nutrition becomes challenging, as children may refuse diverse food options or struggle to consume sufficient amounts.
- » **Lack of parents' knowledge and awareness about proper nutrition** can lead to uninformed food choices, perpetuating unhealthy eating patterns. Moreover, a lack of knowledge and skills in preparing nutritious meals can negatively impact a child's dietary intake and contribute to malnutrition.
- » **Parental factors, such as traditional lifestyles** may influence the extent of care and compassion parents extend towards their children, affecting their overall well-being. Additionally, **parental neglect** due to work, household chores, or other responsibilities can result in inadequate attention to children's dietary needs.



Factors Influencing Teenage Pregnancy

- » **Lack of parental support, communication, and supervision** can contribute to risky behaviors. Strained family relationships or a lack of emotional connection may lead teenagers to seek validation and intimacy elsewhere, increasing their vulnerability to early sexual activity.
- » **Limited knowledge and education on sex** and lack of access to accurate information about contraception and reproductive health can leave teenagers unprepared to make informed decisions about their sexual behavior.
- » **Exposure to pornography, sexualized content in the media, and peer pressure** can normalize risky sexual behavior and create a sense of curiosity or desire to experiment.
- » **History of trauma** can make teenagers more susceptible to engaging in risky behaviors.
- » **Sexual abuse** can lead to early pregnancy, as well as emotional and psychological trauma that may contribute to risky behaviors later in life.

Objective No. 2: Formulate solutions to the identified nutritional and reproductive health concerns in the target communities.

In Project Site No. 1 (Cabusao), solutions for child malnutrition and early pregnancy were discussed extensively. The common solution offered was the promotion of backyard gardening with parental responses focusing on improving domestic conditions, and governmental responses centered on providing institutional support. Meanwhile, responses regarding early pregnancy were categorized based on the needs and perspectives of beneficiaries, including youths, parents, government offices, and NGOs or CSOs. Proposed solutions involved educating youths on sexual health, providing job opportunities, and implementing diversionary activities to prevent early pregnancies.

In Project Site No. 2 (Roxas City), the approach to addressing early pregnancy included conducting house-to-house campaigns to inform youths about available services, establishing adolescent-friendly spaces within barangays, and implementing training programs tailored for teenagers. Additionally, livelihood programs were advocated to empower teenage parents economically.

Box 1. Community-Identified Solutions to Malnutrition	Box 2. Community-Identified Solutions to Teenage Pregnancy
Enhance Family Support and Education Implement parenting programs Provide nutritional education	Provide Sexuality Education Implement school-based sexuality education Utilize house-to-house campaigns
Provide Economic Opportunities Offer livelihood programs Facilitate job training and placement	Promote Youth Engagement Activities Create youth spaces for recreational activities Organize engaging activities (e.g. sports events)
Address Food Security and Access Establish community/backyard gardens Implement school-based feeding programs	Enhance Access to Healthcare Services Establish medical programs Conduct trainings on early pregnancy risks
Foster Collaboration and Community Engagement Mobilize barangay health workers Strengthen monitoring of children	Strengthen Family and Community Support Facilitate parent-child communication Involve community leaders and organizations

In both project sites, **participants emphasized that successfully addressing these complex health challenges and promoting sustainable solutions requires strong institutional support.** This support is crucial for implementing community-proposed solutions and must be integrated with education, community engagement, and strong governmental backing.

Objective No. 3: Disseminate action plans and secure buy-ins from target end users.

The assessment of integrating community action plans into local government and health office plans revealed a shift in focus from dissemination to evaluating sustained utilization. The challenges and achievements are as follows:

- » **Initial Challenges (May-Dec 2022):** Progress was hindered by budget cycle mismatches, administrative complexities, and project implementation delays.
- » **Progress in 2023:** Significant advancements were made, particularly in Cabusao, where key solutions were incorporated into the Municipal Nutrition Action Plan. This included financial aid through cash grants and allocations for food, transportation, and medical assistance.
- » **Cabusao's Approach:** Emphasized a traditional social protection model with financial aid integrated into broader LGU programs.
- » **Legislative Support:** All institutionalized solutions were approved by barangay councils to ensure local support. For example, Resolution No. 06 authorized collaboration between the Mayor's Office and health/social welfare agencies for nutrition projects.
- » **DSWD FO VI (Western Visayas) Model:** Showcased effective intersectoral collaboration for sustained implementation, even without direct legislative authority.

Overall, the objective highlighted both the difficulties and successes in integrating community action plans into local government frameworks, emphasizing the importance of legislative support, intersectoral collaboration, and flexible approaches to social protection.

Outcomes of OGP-PAR

The conduct of the PAR project commenced with identifiable accomplishments. It enabled the government (through the DSWD and LGU representatives), citizens (as represented by the members of the community), and CSOs to work together to arrive at solutions geared towards addressing child malnutrition and early pregnancy. This project has produced significant outcomes.

1. The OGP-PAR project has played a crucial role in advancing participatory governance within the framework of democracy.

Two key initiatives under the project have been particularly active:

- » **Citizen Engagement** provided a platform for community members to understand the issues they face and collaborate with government and institutional partners to devise solutions. This initiative allowed community participants to highlight gaps in awareness regarding services offered by national or local government offices for their specific needs.
- » **Utilization of various communication platforms** facilitated the convergence of government, community participation, and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs). This involved town hall meetings for training, FGDs, discussion of findings, and community action planning.

2. The OGP principles were successfully operationalized, resulting in

- » An **active governance system** that facilitated decision-making, participatory governance, and fostered good practices for partnership, capacity building, and technology use in project sites.
- » **Substantive participation of major governance actors**, ensuring their consultative input translated into concrete decisions, actions, and solutions at the level best suited to community needs.
- » An **end-user focus** that prioritized making project information practically useful and employable, equipping the community with PAR skills beyond the OGP-PAR project and supporting the institutionalization of a community action plan.
- » Stronger **network relations** between the state and the people through DSWD-led partnership-building initiatives with national government agencies, LGUs, and CSOs.

3. The OGP-PAR project successfully empowered citizens to co-create solutions to critical state challenges, including child malnutrition and early pregnancy.

This innovative approach demonstrated the following key achievements:

- » **Increased State Investment.** The project secured significant state attention and resources for these priority issues.
- » **Transparent Decision-Making.** The state's rationale for prioritizing these issues was clearly communicated, aligning with available resources and capabilities.
- » **Demonstrated State Commitment.** The state committed to allocate resources, take ownership of project outcomes, and hold accountable for results.
- » **Broad-Based Citizen Engagement.** Diverse channels, including traditional, non-traditional, and innovative methods, were utilized to reach and involve a wide range of citizens.
- » **Valuing Diverse Contributions.** The project recognized and appreciated the unique contributions of citizens, acknowledging that their participation and engagement are valuable in their own right.

The PAR approach has been instrumental in helping the community identify the root causes of child malnutrition and early pregnancy, enabling a comprehensive assessment of intervention outcomes. The proposed solutions by the community highlighted local perspectives and paved the way for integrated action plans that address these critical issues.

Recommendations

Strengthen the Government's Role in PAR

Government's role in PAR should be strengthened to ensue more active and collaborative government approach in community-driven research. This involves investing in capacity building for program implementers, fostering strong partnerships with local stakeholders, and prioritizing community narratives and experiences in shaping research agendas.

- » **Train implementers.** Invest in comprehensive training for program implementers on PAR methodologies and community engagement.
- » **Secure stakeholder buy-in.** Clearly communicate the benefits of PAR to LGUs and national agencies, especially in government-funded projects.
- » **Partner strategically.** Collaborate with local CSOs and PAR experts for technical guidance and to ensure community ownership.
- » **Develop themes from community input.** Prioritize community narratives and experiences to identify key themes and validate research agendas.
- » **Empower communities.** Provide comprehensive education and support to enable communities to analyze data, develop action plans, and advocate for their needs.

Establish a Strong Governance Framework

Establish a governance framework that prioritizes community empowerment and inclusive decision-making to ensure the success and sustainability of the PAR approach. This framework should be built upon three core pillars:

- » **Foster Inclusive Participation.** Ensure community members are actively involved in every stage of initiatives, from planning and implementation to monitoring and evaluation. This promotes a sense of ownership and shared responsibility.
- » **Empowerment community members.** Empower community members by actively involving them in research activities, which naturally enhances their leadership, organizational, and communication skills.
- » **Offer Holistic Community Education.** Collaborate with stakeholders to provide comprehensive training and consultations that address identified areas for improvement. This approach ensures that the process remains aligned with community needs, values local knowledge, and respects lived experiences.

Implement Governance and Development Reforms

Governance and development reforms shall be implemented to strengthen governance mechanisms and foster sustainable development in the Philippines through legislative reforms, institutional adjustments, and the promotion of community-based initiatives in health and open government practices.

- » **Policy Reform Measures.** Integrate Executive Order 31 into legislative frameworks, emphasizing the Philippine Congress's role in supporting open government principles. Additionally, clarify local government roles and resource-sharing protocols between national and local entities. Lastly, establish clearer guidelines for CSOs partnering with government agencies to enhance transparency and accountability in taxpayer-funded projects.
- » **Health Advocacy and Reform Measures.** Utilize CPAR insights to support an indigenous, community-based health paradigm incorporating national experiences and community knowledge. Moreover, leverage taxpayer-funded initiatives and the OGP platform for developing an all-Filipino health paradigm, with the DSWD playing a pivotal role in organizing events and sponsoring knowledge base development.
- » **Agency Reform Measures.** Further discuss departmental policy on NAP engagements and OGP project commitments, departmental policy and structure for NAP (including terms of engagement of the national and field offices), criteria for partner selection and performance evaluation, activity plans and timelines, budget planning, code of ethics, monitoring and evaluation plans, administrative and operational matters, and establishment of an OGP community.

This evaluation brief was developed by Raquel Celeste, Joy Raquel Tadeo and Ida Gerri Guevara and was peer-reviewed by the OIC of PDPB-M&E Division, Bonn Michael Canoza and PDPB Director Rhodora Alday.