

Long Paper

# Community Participation as Means of Citizen Empowerment: An Evaluation of the Communication and Participation Process of COVID-19 Prevention Programs in Santa Maria, Laguna

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## Abstract

This study aimed to assess the existing communication and participation processes in Santa Maria, Laguna about their COVID-19 prevention programs specifically to (1) identify the catalyst for the development of COVID-19 prevention programs in Santa Maria, Laguna; (2) analyze the stages of the communication and participation process that are used for the COVID-19 prevention programs, namely: (a) assessment stage; (b)



conceptualization stage; and (c) implementation stage; and (3) craft a plan of action for communication and participation process on their COVID-19 prevention programs. Purposive sampling was utilized to select the six respondents, who were community leaders and community health workers. This theory-driven study relied heavily on the Communication for Social Change Model and Convergence Theory. Thematic analysis was used to study the results of semi-structured in-depth interviews and observations. Furthermore, the study identified that COVID-19 catalysts are policy, internal stimuli, and mass media then it goes beyond the above-mentioned assessment stages. Individual assignment of leadership duties and responsibilities induced participation, whereas communication resulted in the formation of dialogues and meetings. The power and approaches to empowerment may have then trickled down to the barangay leaders. The government's pre-existing communication culture, which is even more rigorously vertical and top-down, overshadows efforts for dialogic communication. As evidenced by the work of the barangay health committee, the importance of community participation in the COVID-19 preventive program is gradually being recognized at the community level. Thus, it is recommended that community leaders should hold a formal open discussion with their community members to address their individual COVID-19 concerns, and they should emphasize community participation as means of collectively suppressing the pandemic and as it is a powerful mechanism linked to COVID-19 prevention programs. It is also suggested that future researchers investigate other communication theories and back up their interpretations with quantitative research.

*Keywords* – citizen empowerment, communication and participation process, community participation, COVID-19 prevention programs

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The new emerging disease Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) has highlighted the importance of community engagement and community-centered approaches in health emergency preparedness and response. Community participation is critical in the collective response to COVID-19, from compliance with health protocols and lockdown measures to the necessary steps as countries ease restrictions to community support through volunteering (Adenipekun, 2020).

Participation in the community results in citizen empowerment. This type of participation demonstrates empowerment. Hence, empowerment is seen as a process or an outcome, as collective or individual, the focus is on people and the real difference achieved for them. In the notion that COVID-19 is not really a development program, but it was really a response there was no real planning at any stage, especially within. Thus, of all the places with regards in having a localized context of how community participation interplay with the prevention programs as a response to COVID-19, this study was conducted during the midst of pandemic from August 2021 to May 2022 in Santa Maria, Laguna as the primary research setting. Aside from its proximity, the researchers

previously observed that, despite the efforts of local government officers and health workers, there are still people who overlook the risk posed by COVID-19 to their health, people who do not follow the implemented prevention programs because there are some who do not believe in COVID-19 and believe that it will make them sicker even when the authorities warn them.

In this regard, to gain a thorough understanding of the situation, this study incorporated a theoretical framework, specifically the Communication for Social Change Model and Convergence Theory, among others, and sought to discover the existing communication and participation processes that occur in conjunction with their prevention. The three specific objectives were to (1) identify the catalyst for development of the COVID-19 prevention programs in Santa Maria, Laguna; (2) analyze the stages of the communication and participation process used for the COVID-19 prevention programs, namely: (a) assessment stage; (b) conceptualization stage; and (c) implementation stage; and (3) craft a plan of action for communication and participation process on their COVID-19 prevention program.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### ***Community Participation***

Several scholars define community participation as some form of participation of people with similar needs and goals in decisions that affect their lives. According to Al Siyabi et al. (2021), community participation is the process by which individuals and families take responsibility for their own health and welfare, as well as the health and welfare of the community, and develop their capacity to contribute to community development. This involvement seeks to empower local leaders, parents, families, groups, and the entire community. It entails deliberate actions to achieve, influence, and involve all relevant segments and sectors of society to realize a common goal. As a result, it goes beyond dialogue or interaction with specific groups to truly consult and empower all people, particularly the poor, deprived, and disadvantaged members of society.

According to the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence Guideline (2016), the five different levels of community engagement or participation are often referred to as levels of participation: inform, consult, involve, collaborate, and empower. It adds to Paolo Friere's work on 'empowerment,' as well as Sherry Arnstein's work on a ladder of citizen participation,' which is revisited for understanding people's participation in the development of an effective community engagement strategy.

Community participation, according to Akumu and Onono (2017), allows beneficiaries to influence the direction and execution of development programs rather than simply receiving a share of the program. Similarly, to walk the human development

path, people must fully participate in activities that reform their lives and be able to participate in policy making processes and outcomes.

In general, there appears to be a large body of literature indicating that involving community participation in development programs is an important step toward ensuring that development programs operate sustainably and thus meet their intended objectives for the community and the targeted beneficiaries.

### ***Implications of Community Participation on Health Issue***

Many studies have shown the value of community involvement in the field of health. Community participation, according to Haricharan et al. (2021), is an essential component of primary health care (PHC) and a human rights approach to health. It has been regarded as an essential component of the primary health care approach, which emphasizes patient involvement in health care planning and delivery. Furthermore, participation is defined as "decision-making" that should take place at the local, national, and international levels to develop a national public health strategy and action plan.

According to Haldane et al. (2019), one of the main characteristics of community participation in health is that individuals and community groups collaborate in making decisions to address health-related issues and threats such as pandemics and promote well-being to achieve positive health outcomes. A recent review found substantial evidence that community participation, as multifaceted practices influenced by a variety of social and cultural factors, has a positive effect on health, particularly when supported by strong organizational and community processes. As a result, the concept of community participation necessitates a highly participatory environment in which community-based initiatives provide community structures and mechanisms for effective enforcement.

According to Howard-Grabman et al. (2017), community participation is a process in which people, both individually and in groups, exercise their right to play an active and direct role in the development of appropriate health services, ensuring the conditions for sustained better health, and supporting community empowerment to aid development. Involving communities in assessing and developing strategies to meet their own needs can increase intervention ownership and sustainability, while responsiveness to community needs in health program planning and implementation can help improve health equity, service delivery, and care uptake.

### ***Citizen Empowerment***

In terms of citizens' commitment to the community, strengthening citizenship refers to the opportunities and accessibility provided to citizens by their leaders and representatives in each social field for citizens to develop the necessary skills for active participation in the community. Community development and decision-making are valuable, and they can be viewed not only in terms of politics, but also in terms of

knowledge and other aspects (for example, digital inclusion), and they can influence the quality of daily life (Haricharan et al., 2021).

Furthermore, according to Singh (n.d.), the media serves as a powerful catalyst for social change. Without a doubt, the mass media, which commands, boasts the society, and social elements, is one of the most important tools for motivating and discouraging people. Today of media globalization, the media is the backbone of social growth. In a world where everything works because of information, it is the media that brings about all kinds of changes and shapes them according to public opinion. It raises widespread public awareness. According to Doan-Bau (2017) and Figueroa et al. (2002), the catalyst is the most important component of the entire community participation process because it is responsible for awakening communities to understand the situation and/or issues.

As a result, citizen participation has become a more widely accepted method of development practice, and it is used by a wide range of organizations. It is frequently promoted as a viable alternative to widespread "top-down" development.

### ***The COVID-19 Prevention Programs***

COVID-19 prevention programs are intended to control COVID-19 exposures in the workplace and to protect public health. COVID-19 is a disease caused by a new strain of coronavirus, according to the World Health Organization (2020). The letters 'CO,' 'VI,' and 'D' stand for corona, virus, and disease, respectively. This disease was previously known as '2019 novel coronavirus' or '2019-nCoV.' The COVID-19 virus is a new virus that belongs to the same virus family as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and some types of common cold. When people touch a contaminated object and then touch their eyes, nose, or mouth, COVID-19 is transmitted less frequently. The virus that causes COVID-19 is highly contagious and can be spread by people who do not have the disease. Particles containing the virus can travel more than 6 feet, especially when indoors and relative humidity is less than 40%. The CDC estimates that more than half of the virus's spread comes from people who had no symptoms at the time it spread (Gilmore et al., 2020). Furthermore, Dalziel et al. (2018) discovered that virus transmission can be influenced by geographical factors such as climatic conditions (temperature and humidity) and population density (PD). Bashir et al. (2020) found that mean temperature, minimum temperature, and air quality had a significant association with the COVID-19 pandemic in a study conducted in New York, USA, using the Kendall and Spearman rank correlation test.

As countries around the world continue to face the threat of the COVID-19 pandemic, national governments and health ministries develop, implement, and revise health policies and standards based on World Health Organization (WHO) recommendations, other countries' experiences, and on-the-ground experiences. Early health interventions were primarily aimed at preventing and reducing transmission in vulnerable populations. The scale and speed of these measures vary by country, as some have more resources and are better prepared in terms of healthcare capacity and the availability of stringent policies (Talabis et al., 2021). According to Dye et al. (2020), where

individual or collective beliefs and behaviors surrounding a specific diagnosis result in any type of social discrimination and moral discredit, people are less likely to seek care in a timely or even at all. Bhanot et al. (2021) agreed that COVID-19 patients are stigmatized and thus bear the consequences that are far more pernicious than the condition itself. Social rejection has created a barrier between them and society, with consequences for their physical, psychological, and emotional health and well-being. Patients are afraid of being stigmatized and shamed by society.

As part of the COVID-19 preventive measures implemented by the Inter-Agency Task Force for Management of Emerging Infectious Diseases (IATF) (2020), the Philippines developed a national action plan to combat the virus's spread. To 'adapt to the new normal,' the government implemented the Prevent, Detect, Isolate, Treat, and Reintegrate (PDITR) strategy. This strategy aims to control the virus's spread while also ensuring citizens' public health safety. This strategy also encourages constituents to maintain minimum health standards, such as regular hand washing, wearing a face mask and face shield, and observing social distancing. The government decided to have a geographical priority in the vaccine procurement and deployment program.

According to the Department of Health (2020), they collaborated with the World Health Organization to launch COVID KAYA, a mobile app to help first responders with contact tracing and case monitoring. Introducing a new centralized data system in regions with varying needs and infrastructures can be difficult and inconsistent. Their team provides technical assistance to local governments to help them implement the application, as well as direct training on how to use it to officials, health workers, and health epidemiology unit staff. In addition to health care professionals, Barangay Health Workers (BHW) play critical roles during times of crisis.

According to the Official Gazette (1995), Republic Act No. 7883, also known as "An act granting benefits and incentives to accredited barangay health workers and for other purposes," BHWs have undergone training programs under any accredited government and non-government organization and who voluntarily renders primary health care services in the community after being accredited to function as such by the local health board in a community (DOH).

To summarize, COVID-19 prevention programs have made significant contributions to mitigating virus spread and restoring humanity's way of life to normal.

### ***Development Communication***

Scholars have focused heavily on development communication in recent years to better understand both rural and urban situations in both domestic and foreign countries. Development communication, according to Dr. Nora Quebral, is both an art and a science of human communication used to advance a country's economic growth, reduce inequalities, and promote better fulfillment of human potential. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Development

Communication Network (DevCom) (2020), development communication is critical to maintaining the necessary attention to issues to gain the necessary commitment from world leaders and the public to make sense of the process. Communication is an essential component of political and political processes. Over time, economic and social development theories and models have undergone a broader shift. National governments, the international community, and academia recognized the importance of meeting the information and communication needs of marginalized and vulnerable people in the early 1950s, particularly by integrating them into the empowerment process. These development partners recognized the importance of communication in enabling people to influence decisions that affect their quality of life.

According to a study by Somma and Kilroy (2020), it is critical to regularly monitor progress toward goals from the start of a development project or program, to allow for course correction if necessary, and at completion to measure and evaluate successes and failures so that lessons can be learned for future projects.

As a result, development communication advocates for participatory communication to increase citizen engagement and empowerment. It cannot, however, be accomplished through infrequent visits and meetings. It should be seen as a process over time.

### ***Participation and Power***

Participation has become the dominant approach in all development initiatives, and the World Bank recognizes this by recognizing that meaningful social change in any development initiative cannot be achieved solely through the involvement of external experts in development processes, regardless of whether development is taking place in developed or developing countries. The approach is also important today because it allows people and communities to define and become subjects of their own development rather than becoming objects of technologically involved development processes (Ako, 2017).

Participation necessitates listening and trust to reduce the social distance between communicators and receivers, teachers and students, leaders and followers, and to facilitate a more equitable exchange of ideas, knowledge, and experiences. Listening is not limited to those on the receiving end in this context. It must involve governments as well as citizens, the poor as well as the wealthy, planners, and administrators as well as their intended beneficiaries. As a result, participation necessitates that all groups, whether poor, disabled, illiterate, or literate, be able to participate in an open and accessible platform where they can carefully reflect and debate issues, weigh the strengths and weaknesses of alternative solutions to a problem, and aim to arrive at a decision or judgment based not only on facts and data, but also on values, emotions, and other less technical considerations (Nabatchi et al., 2017).

Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation, which provides a useful metric to qualify participation types across a spectrum from tokenistic (informing, consulting, or placating citizens) to participation at the level of citizen power (delegated power by citizens and/or direct citizen control), described the power dynamics inherent in participation more broadly (Cunningham et al., 2019).

Power is frequently thought to be centralized and embedded in structures, with the powerful being those with resources and expertise who wield power over the powerless. There are winners and losers in such a scenario, and empowerment entails shifting power away from the center using tools such as participation. This understanding of power is frequently found in rights-based approaches and grassroots participation discourses that seek to shift the balance of power away from the powerful (usually the state) and toward the powerless (Mathie et al., 2017).

### **Community Development**

Community development is a broad term with numerous conceptual and practical definitions. This is especially noticeable in the twenty-first century, which has seen an increase in the number of communities engaged in community development efforts. The growing interest in community development stems from the field's demonstrated ability to provide solutions to community problems. Furthermore, the diverse ways in which communities around the world participate in community development efforts has contributed to the conceptual and practical pluralism of community development. As a result, there has been a noticeable increase in the number and diversity of individuals and organizations from various disciplines and frameworks practicing and studying community development (Boulet et al., 2020).

Community development is a process in which people come together to act on issues that are important to them. In this regard, Quimbo et al. (2019) conducted a study on the evolution and development of various community development approaches and methods, which included a contextual review and qualitative meta-analysis of empirical studies dealing with approaches and methods in community development spanning five decades of Philippine research studies and cases. It is worth noting that, over the course of five decades of Philippine community development experience, community-based and participatory approaches to development work have been consistently and persistently used. Community education and community organizing remained popular development intervention strategies.

According to Meirinawati et al. (2018), community development efforts necessitated the development of a scale of priority programs tailored to the conditions, issues, and real needs of each region. Community development programs address not only visible issues, but also issues that are latent or hidden. It is critical to be disclosed as a factor in determining societal development priorities. Priority community development on a small scale was attempted using local resources. For Laato et al. (2020), internal stimuli influence people's behavioral responses to situations. During outbreaks, there are



direct causal links between stimuli and action, as well as affective and cognitive intermediate layers. In the context of a global pandemic, stimuli should be the sources of information from which people learn about the pandemic.

### **Synthesis**

Communication and citizen participation played an important role in community-based programs, particularly in the field of health, according to related literature and studies. Many of the studies defined the participation process, which is extremely useful in constructing various health issues at the community level. The purpose of this research was to develop a detailed step-by-step communication and participation process in COVID-19 prevention programs. However, there is a scarcity of relevant literature conducted in Philippine localities, many of which are foreign.

The Local Government Code of 1991 guaranteed and promoted the autonomy of local government units, particularly barangays, to ensure their full development as self-sufficient communities. However, there have been no follow-up studies that focus on the autonomy of barangay levels in handling their community-based programs, as most are delegated from higher government levels, according to the related literature and studies.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

The qualitative research method was used to collect and analyze data for this study. The researchers used a purposive sampling technique in which participants were stakeholders, specifically community leaders and/or community health workers, because they are regarded as the only few who are aware of the processes involved in the COVID-19 prevention program and are aware of the steps that must be taken for the community program to be successful.

### **Research Locale**

The study's units of analysis were three barangays in Santa Maria, Laguna with the highest COVID-19 cases and three barangays with the lowest COVID-19 cases, based on statistics gathered from their Rural Health Unit (RHU). Apart from its proximity, Santa Maria, Laguna was chosen as the study location because the researchers had prior observations in the midst of the pandemic that despite the efforts made by local government officers and health officers, there are still people who overlook the risk posed by COVID-19 to their health - people who do not follow the implemented prevention programs because there are some who do not believe in COVID and believe that it will make them more ill even when the authorities warn them. In this regard, the researchers intended to conduct a thorough examination of their existing communication

and participation processes in COVID-19 prevention programs to learn how community members and key leaders responded.

### ***Theoretical Framework***

The Communication for Social Change Model and Convergence Theory were primarily used as guides for further evaluation of how communication is enacted in the community's participation process in the COVID-19 prevention program. The Convergence Model, Ladder of Citizen Participation, and Levels of Shared Decision Making were then used to provide a lens for exploring citizen empowerment, assessing the extent of involvement, and decision-making power possessed by citizens themselves. The data gathered from the respondents' responses was carefully evaluated and used as the foundation for developing proposed action plans to assist the community.

### ***Research Instrument***

In-depth interviews were conducted in accordance with the flow of the interview guide questions, with a focus on how communication was enacted in the community's participation process in the COVID-19 prevention program. Prior to the interview, the key informant was sent a consent form. The researchers used a Tagalog or Filipino questionnaire as an interview guide in actual interviews, which took no more than an hour and were conducted during the key informant's available time. The audio recorder was used as a research instrument to help with data collection for the study. With permission, responses from the interview were recorded and transcribed for use in the study. Furthermore, in accordance with data privacy law and data handling guidelines, the audio recorded data were destroyed following the completion of this research study. Finally, observations were used in conjunction with the checklist guide. This is to allow the researchers to review information from various stages of community dialogue and collective action, if any, as well as to gain an insight or general overview of the community participation process. The collected data was analyzed and organized using thematic analysis in relation to the study's purpose.

## **RESULTS**

Based on the findings, the six barangays in Santa Maria, Laguna who had the highest rate of COVID-19 cases are Bagong Pook, Coralan, Cueva, Matalinting, Pao-o, and Poblacion II. In this regard, there are three identified catalysts for development of the COVID-19 prevention programs in Santa Maria, Laguna.

First, the government policy. The most cited COVID-19 prevention programs stimulant among the barangay leaders was the external prompt because of the policies

formed by the government, specifically the Santa Maria Rural Health Unit (RHU) and Department of Health (DOH), as well as the municipal office (e.g., mayor directives). The study outcomes demonstrated how these officials and leaders are tasked with enhancing the resident's overall health. As a result, they were in charge of devising and implementing health-related initiatives on the ground.

Second was internal stimulus. Due to an increase in the number of cases and sudden COVID-19 outbreaks in the barangays. It helped lay the groundwork for the prevention program to be developed.

Lastly, the mass media triggers. People became more aware of COVID-19 using mass media or social media channels to get news about it, which helped to raise community awareness. It also aids in the initiation of dialogues about the issues at hand among members of the community. However, the necessity of participatory activities that are developed and conceived inside and for the community emphasized the need to acknowledge that the empowerment process in communities require a driving force, a catalyst, which can motivate community members to engage and participate over time.

Furthermore, the study reveals that COVID-19 prevention programs have the stages of the communication and participation process. For the assessment stage, individual designation to leadership duties and responsibility induces engagement while communication leads to the formation of exclusive dialogues and meetings. The community and its members' background understanding are then based on the agreed upon interpretations and understandings of the issue and circumstances. There are times that during these discussions and formations of shared ideas, residents do not have the power to formalize their viewpoints in a form that would have an impact on the community's general decisions. They are merely tending as consumers of information regarding COVID-19. In fact, in the establishment of goals and objectives for COVID-19 prevention program and when asked the respondent on how they agreed with those and if there are any conflict arises, Respondent 2 said, "*Hindi [isinasama ang mga mamamayan] kumbaga, ang ano lang 'yung mga sa sanggunian nga... kumbaga syempre nasa paliwanag naman 'yun. Wala namang naging problema.*" (It does not [include people], it is exclusively for barangay council. It is based on how you address the issue. Nothing became a problem.) Meanwhile, Respondent 3 also claimed, "*Meron din naman [hindi sumasang-ayon] pero 'pag napaliwanagan naman e ay ayos na dahil kung nakikita naman 'yung sitwasyon kawawa naman ang sanggunian at talagang ang sanggunian ang dapat manguna o magpatupad o anumang programa o batas ang ilalatag sa barangay.*" (There are also people who [disagree] but once they hear the explanations, they immediately understand. They observe what is happening and realize the situation. Barangay officials are the one who lead and implement the law that will be laid down in the barangay.)

When it comes to the conceptualization stage, the maximum level of engagement was achieved through placation, in which the barangay's key leaders are periodically consulted regarding action plans of the barangay's COVID-19 prevention programs. When

those in higher positions in the barangay decide to consult selected individuals, the rest of the residents could also take part. The barangay leaders typically have participation to talk about options for actions. To prove, for instance, when distributing responsibilities to community members for COVID-19 programs, Respondent 4 said, “*Sitio by sitio. Inuutusan*

*niya [Kapitan] ‘yung mga kagawad niya na sa Sitio mo asikasuhin mo. ‘Pag halimbawang meron pang hindi magpaturok obligadong ipapresent ‘yung pangalan sa BHW.’” (Sitio by sitio. He [Kapitan] orders his councilors to take care of their respective Sitio. For example, if there is someone who still not yet vaccinated, their name is obligated to present to BHW.) Residents will be able to participate in the activity-based program implementation unless the spaces for citizen participation are gradually opens again. However, in conceptualizing the options for action, these are rarely discussed both with community members and key leaders (mostly the key leaders only) and talked about as there are only minor changes to be done when the action plan is adapted in the barangay. There is a factor that the key leaders are comfortable with what is already there and what was already adapted to. With that, the community may miss other options which could be more beneficial to them than their current strategy.*

For the implementation stage, it points out that there are still some barangays who have yet to undertake evaluations at this time. Indeed, Respondent 6 said, “*Wala. Pero tatal lumuwag nga e ang pagjojoke e ang gamot nga daw e ang election joke-joke nanaman ang dating, pero sa totoo lang ay nandoon pa rin ako sa pag-iingat.*” (Nothing. But after all, since we are now loosening the restrictions, others became it a joke that election is a medicine. But honestly, I am still into being careful.) Respondent 3 also said, “*Yung mga evaluation na iyon, wala pa.*” (Those evaluations are not there yet.) The researchers observed that there seems to be no regular monitoring of the implementation of COVID-19 programs in those barangays. Commonly, they merely act when there are orders from higher authorities.

## **DISCUSSION**

As the catalysts for development of the COVID-19 prevention programs in Santa Maria, Laguna has been identified, it can be connected to the accounts of Doan-Bau (2017) and Figueroa et al. (2002) that these catalysts are the most fundamental element in the whole process of community participation. It is responsible for awakening communities to understand the situation and/or issues that impair their quality of life, thus, starting dialogues that lead to collective action and eventually, social change.

The process of communication and participation in Santa Maria, Laguna, can be broken down into different stages. During the assessment stage, it becomes clear that even though residents are aware of their COVID-19 concerns, they still rely on the barangay leader’s ability to formalize those issues, which eventually lead to the development of COVID-19 shared perceptions. This discovery opposed the notion of Akumu and Onono (2017) that community participation allows beneficiaries to influence

the direction and execution of development programs rather than merely receive a share of the program.

In addition to the study found out in conceptualization stage, based on Nabatchi et al. (2017), participation requires that all groups, whether the poor, disabled, illiterates, literates etc. should be able to take part in an open and accessible participation platform where they can carefully reflect and debate matters, weigh the strengths and weaknesses of alternative solutions to a problem, and aim to arrive at a decision or judgment based on not only facts and data, but also on values, emotions, and other less technical consideration. Moreover, the formation of goals and objectives, distribution of responsibility, and deliberation and absorption of community concerns all depend on the present COVID-19 situation in the barangay. This is because barangay health programs are primarily focused with implementing action plans in response to community health issues.

The above findings in implementation stage can be connected to Somma and Kilroy (2020) which confirmed that from the moment a development project or program takes off, it is essential to regularly monitor progress towards its goals, to allow for course correction if needed, and at completion to measure and evaluate successes and failures, so that lessons can be learned for future projects. The evaluation that was presented has continued to be passable but in juxtaposition with the actual implementation of the program. Thus, the assessment is still incomplete and does not address all the issues and roadblocks that the community's COVID-19 programs have encountered throughout the process. This result is incongruent to the concept of Haldane et al. (2019) that community participation requires a highly participatory environment where community-based initiatives provide community structures and mechanisms to effectively enforce them.

To sum up, it was found that the power and approaches of empowerment may have indeed trickled down and came down to the barangay's leaders. The current form of leadership-encouraged participation remains to be temporary and short-term, with a focus on monitoring as a contribution. Hence, the researchers perceived that it is not sustainable for a long term and could be beneficial for a limited period.

After analyzing the study's findings and the collected data, the researchers came up with a proposed action plan that communities and key leaders can be considered to use for utilizing their communication and participation processes on COVID-19 prevention programs.

Table 1. Proposed Action Plan for Community's Communication and Participation Process regarding COVID-19 Prevention Program

Stages	Identified Problems	Proposed Actions that can Address the Problems
<b>Assessment</b>	<p><i>(Identification and Involvement of Leaders)</i> The community members have little opportunity to take the lead in COVID-19 prevention programs due to fear of being infected with the virus and taking the responsibility.</p>	<p>The community leaders should have an open communication to their community members and instill to them that they have the right to get involved, as well as opportunity to lead.</p> <p>Explain to the community members, in a concise manner, how they can contribute to the success of COVID-19 prevention and how they can help.</p>
	<p><i>(Clarification of Perceptions)</i> In assessing health as an effective mechanism for community development, it was revealed that there are some people who are afraid of being tested and disclosing their information even if they are exhibiting COVID-19 symptoms.</p>	<p>Engaging social influencers, such as trusted people in the community, role models, religious leaders, teachers, community volunteers, health care professionals, etc. to encourage reflection on stigmatized people and how to help them to spread messages that eliminate stigma. These personalities who are invited to communicate should be well-targeted.</p> <p>The material that will be used must be personally relevant to the people they are trying to persuade, as well as culturally and physically acceptable. A barangay leader (e.g., brgy. chairman) and not just the mayor for example, may go live or post a video on social media about a COVID-19 that could address their pressing issues.</p>
	<p><i>(Establishment of goals and objectives)</i> The barangays have no clear own localized set goals and objectives, as well as own design strategy responses in mitigating COVID-19, most of what they have are delegated from higher authorities.</p>	<p>Empower the barangay leadership or authorities in developing their own set of goals and objectives that could address their own community problem, as a result, they will be able to envision what the outcomes would be.</p> <p>For the actions to succeed, it is necessary to have a clear direction. A community survey could also be conducted to gather information for the purpose of establishing clear goals and objectives. In this way, the community key leaders can be able to ensure the participation of their constituents.</p>
	<p><i>(Establishment of Goals and Objectives)</i> In formulation of decisions, the community members are not included especially when setting the delegated goals and objectives for COVID-19, mostly the barangay committee only.</p>	<p>Webinar software may be a great tool to engage community members in decision-making when they are socially distant, and it can assist develop and maintain connections while people are socially distant. Many of them, such as Zoom and Messenger Call, may also be accessed over the phone, making them more accessible to those who do not have reliable internet access in the</p>

		<p>first place. These platforms can host dialogues, focus groups, and webinars on a variety of themes, and they can be useful for gathering ideas and input on a strategy that has been offered.</p> <p>Meetings can also be recorded, which makes it easier to keep track of what is being discussed.</p> <p>The perceptions of the community members can still be considered by community leaders in these above-mentioned ways, which can aid in making decisions. This is vital to avoid overlooking the possible options for actions in solving the community COVID-19 related problems.</p>
<b>Conceptual</b>	<p><i>(Establishment of Goals and Objectives)</i> On why a conflict arose in the setting of goals and objectives for mitigating COVID-19, it was determined that there are people who do not believe in the existence of that virus.</p>	<p>COVID-19 risks should be communicated openly, consistently, and honestly by the community. In the COVID-19 issue, they must also understand people's knowledge, behaviors, and views. It becomes a crucial step in designing not only message but also knowing the perceived barriers to the adoption of preventive behaviors and hence community involvement initiatives.</p>
	<p><i>(Mapping a Course of Options)</i> Some forms of conflict arise due to the issue of assistance distribution because when someone is not included on the list, they protest and become enraged as to why they are not included; and terrified of getting vaccinated because they heard on the news that something bad will happen to them if they were vaccinated.</p>	<p>Behavior-focused and forward-looking messages should be delivered to the community.</p> <p>In the community, early clear and friendly warnings/communication, especially to those who are involved and those who are not in any assistance distributions should be addressed to avoid conflict.</p> <p>Set up a foundation of trust and mutual understanding so that people are fully aware of the dangers and can mobilize their communities to take the necessary precautions, while also overcoming public message skepticism and countering misinformation.</p>
	<p><i>(Mapping a Course of Options)</i> The community members have less participation in the conceptualization meeting in adapting the plan of actions for the barangay level, only the barangay council was involved.</p>	<p>Community key leaders should map community-based measures for which their community members can play an important integral role in conceptualizing their health control measures. This is essential to ensure their participation at this stage.</p> <p>In the framework of the COVID-19 response, clearly define the roles of the community members and include them in planning and decision-making.</p>

	<p><i>(Assigning of Responsibilities)</i></p> <p>It was observed that conflicts arise such as disobedience of people in the assigned responsibilities, have their own reasons for doing the duty (i.e., emergency), and their barangay captain is forced to do it.</p>	<p>Staff reassignment and task sharing, as well as the identification of incentive systems for community workers that are particular to the situation should be recommended to form.</p> <p>Prior to implementation, a remuneration plan must be decided upon, with clear criteria for activation and deactivation.</p> <p>Through trusted channels, monitor and respond to the assigned individuals' perceptions, rumors, queries, and feedback, as well as adapt response strategies.</p>
<b>Implementation</b>	<p><i>(Implementation Aspect)</i></p> <p>There was a difficulty with the action plan's execution. Some of the issues are that some people are defiant (i.e., not following when liquor ban was imposed, hard to encourage to get vaccinated, not attending while there are clean-up drives, unable to perform the ordered tasks or responsibility of higher positions, violating health protocols) while others have their own thoughts and principles, such as the belief that not all implementations are applicable in all places.</p>	<p>To address fears, concerns, misinformation, and stigmatization associated with people infected with COVID-19 and/or responders upon the implementation of those preventive programs, the community should systematically monitor and respond regularly to perceptions, rumors, questions, suggestions, and feedback from communities through trusted and culturally appropriate, available, and accessible, remote, or face-to-face channels.</p> <p>Bring this above information to the attention of the key leaders or the barangay committee as a means of making the necessary changes to the response in a timely manner. Responses to major concerns made by communities must be fed back to them as often as possible and relevant, thus disclosing the participatory process.</p>
	<p><i>(Measuring the COVID-19 Prevention Program Outcomes)</i></p> <p>It was noticed that losing the people's livelihood is one of its major saddening effects due to stringent travel and border restrictions. This is especially because agricultural products are hard to market, that is why the people wanted to recoup the amount of money they invested as well as the many losses they suffered.</p>	<p>Local markets and food security should be supported as often as possible during the implementation of COVID-19 prevention strategies by ensuring access to agricultural products and amenities as well as humanitarian assistance as needed.</p> <p>Consider securing access to commodities for vulnerable households, as well as evaluating the option of procuring land and engaging out agricultural production.</p> <p>In the processes and programs adapt to the outbreak, ensure that the marginalized are not left behind.</p>
	<p><i>(Evaluation)</i></p> <p>There is a lack of publicizing the</p>	<p>The community leaders should present their evaluation to their community members in a</p>



	<p>evaluation of COVID-19 programs in the barangay level; most of those evaluations are for RHU documents only.</p>	<p>comprehensive manner with consideration in data privacy.</p> <p>Community members will be better informed too on COVID-19 implementation updates in their community. It will also help them to be more aware of the behaviors that can be done to completely control this virus.</p>
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## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, the policy, internal stimuli, and mass media are the identified catalysts for development of the COVID-19 prevention programs in Santa Maria, Laguna. At all stages and aspects of community dialogue and collective action that are used for the COVID-19 prevention programs, the traditional one-way style of communication remains a major approach used within the barangays. The pre-existing culture of communication, brought about by the government is even more rigorously vertical, top-down structure, overshadows the efforts for dialogic communication. Furthermore, the importance of community participation in the COVID-19 preventive program is gradually being acknowledged at the community level, as seen by the work of the barangay health committee. With this, the researchers came up with a proposed action plan for the community's communication and participation process on their COVID-19 prevention program.

Moreover, the researchers proposed several recommendations. Initially, community leaders should conduct a formal open discussion among their community members to address the respective COVID-19 concerns. Next, community leaders and community health workers of Santa Maria, Laguna should focus on community participation as means of collectively suppressing the pandemic as it is a powerful mechanism linked to COVID-19 prevention programs.

In particular, the local government of Santa Maria, Laguna should empower the barangay leadership by acknowledging and supporting them to design their own set of goals, objectives, and crisis action plans with the active involvement of residents—residents that would not just a consumer of information but could formally voice out too their concerns regardless of social standing. It could help to address their barangay-based concerns to prevent overlooking the other plan of actions that should be discussed, therefore, they would be able to perceive the potential outcomes. It is also applicable for local government officers of Santa Maria, Laguna to conduct benchmarking activities among the barangays, both those who maintained low cases and got high cases of COVID-19. Then, community health workers and leaders should actively monitor and evaluate the implemented COVID-19 prevention programs in their community to address all issues and roadblocks and to have an immediate response thereof. Barangay health

committee in Santa Maria, Laguna should also establish a fixed schedule meetings regarding COVID-19 prevention programs to have a regular discussion on the conditions of their implemented programs and concerned participants therein.

Lastly, for future researchers, they could explore other communication theories and models to address the other approach of community communication and participation processes. To support the interpretations with descriptive data, it is recommended to use a quantitative research design.

## **IMPLICATIONS**

In the light of the findings of this study and the integration of Communication for Social Change Model among other theories was able to uncover how communication and participation can function interdependently. These also provide a lens in exploring the citizen empowerment, assessing the extent of involvement, and decision-making power possessed by the citizens themselves.

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## **DECLARATIONS**

### ***Conflict of Interest***

The authors agree and affirm that there are no conflicts of interest between any co-authors regarding the topics or resources covered in this paper.

### ***Informed Consent***

This study guaranteed a participant's approval behind the sources and affirmed that they understood the process clearly. Both a formal briefing and a debriefing were

conducted as part of the interview protocol. The composition, objectives, and implications of the presented information were explained to the participants.

### **Ethics Approval**

Using the instruments for data gathering as well as the overall concept of this research study, the Research Development Office of the Campus and proper authority reviewed and approved it to conduct with the assurance that the appropriate ethical standards are being upheld.

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### **Author's Biography**

Merilyn P. Rubin is from Santa Maria, Laguna who graduated *Cum laude* with Communication Arts degree and became the best student research presenter during the 2<sup>nd</sup> Research Colloquium at Laguna University. She shares her experiences and skills within and outside their institution. In fact, she is a passionate academic researcher, does guesting in an educational show, a volunteer and field reporter in Bantay Halalan Laguna 2022 as well as a citizen journalist of MovePh or Rappler. Moreover, she was a news writer/researcher at College Editors Guild of the Philippines (The National Guild) and the Editor-in-Chief of The Communicator, the official student publication of Communication Department at Laguna University. Above all, she always value education and love for arts because she believes that it takes a greater opportunity for achieving goals and for marking the lives of others.

Mark Vincent D. Ansay is from Cavinti, Laguna who graduated with Communication Arts degree and became the best student research presenter during the 2<sup>nd</sup> Research Colloquium at Laguna University. He was an avid dancer and member of Laguna University Performing Arts Club (LUPAC), a Gawad Comm 2019 Hiphop Dancer, a

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