

Stories of These Abilities: Cases of Community-Based Organizing of Persons with Disabilities in the Province of Albay

Annelyn Ventura-Mendoza^{1*} 

¹Bicol University, Daraga, Albay, 4501, Philippines
Email: avmendoza@bicol-u.edu.ph

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR (*):

Annelyn Ventura-Mendoza
(avmendoza@bicol-u.edu.ph)

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ABSTRACT

The study documented the experiences of persons with disabilities (PWDs) in organizing Disabled Persons' Organizations (DPOs) in Albay province and proposed a social development framework for their empowerment. The researcher anchored the study on Social Development Theory, Conflict Theory, and Motivation Theory to analyze DPO stories, challenges, strategies, and insights. Using a qualitative case study design, the team gathered data from 10 selected DPOs through focus group discussions and interviews. Findings revealed that DPOs overcame significant challenges, including discrimination, limited resources, and bureaucratic hurdles, despite starting small and without government support. Each organization developed unique strategies to navigate frustrations, promote equality, and advocate for empathetic PDAO leadership by a person with a disability. The study highlighted the importance of collective actions, skill-building, and community involvement. Ultimately, the research identified key components – from fostering healthy beliefs and developing individual potential to enhancing skills and recognizing achievements – that provide a roadmap for sustaining inclusive and resilient DPOs that advance PWDs' individual and collective well-being in Albay.

Contribution/Originality: This study documents the experiences of persons with disabilities in terms of organizing in the province of Albay, Philippines. This is in order to provide a clearer picture of their (sector) present situation. The results of the study provided baseline data and recommendations to the support institutions, specifically to the local government units (LGUs) after formulating a development framework in working with persons with disabilities and their families.

1. Introduction

This is the story of Hannah.

May kapansanan si Hannah na kung lumakad ay iika-ika

Muntik-muntikang mahulog sa dyip

Pagpanaog, paakyat at pababa

Si Manong drayber, kibit-balikat, patay-malisya

Walang pakialam kahit pa makadisgrasya.

*lisa ang hangarin ng bawat isa
Maging pantay ang lahat sa pribiliheyo man o pagpaparusa
Pagkat mayroon mang pagkakaiba-iba
Dapat na magkatulad sa pagrespeto, pagpapahalaga, at pagkilala.
(Mendoza, 2023)*

[Hannah is disabled, she walks and her pace is troubled
In public transport, she finds trouble
When she alights or offboards
Coz the silly driver, her condition is ignored
He doesn't care
Even if he causes a scare

All has but a single aim
To be equal in punishment or gain
Because even if everyone is different
There should be fairness in respect, value, and treatment]
(Mendoza, 2023)

In a poetic narrative by the researcher, the Story of Hannah, a woman with disability, illustrates the everyday challenges faced by persons with disabilities (PWDs) in the Philippines. From navigating public transportation to being disregarded by drivers and bystanders alike, Hannah's experience is a microcosm of the broader systemic exclusion endured by many PWDs. Beyond being a personal account, Hannah's story symbolizes both the resilience of persons with disabilities and the persistent barriers they face in pursuit of equitable treatment, social inclusion, and recognition of their dignity.

Approximately 15% of the global population lives with a disability, with 2 – 4% experiencing significant functional limitations (World Health Organization 2011). As one of the most marginalized groups in Asia and the Pacific, PWDs face limited access to essential services; consequently, frameworks like the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) promote equality, inclusion, and dignity, uniquely emphasizing PWDs as agents of their own lives (Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2008). In the Philippines, legislative efforts and national institutions like the Philippine Coordinating Center for Inclusive Development (PCCID) and the grassroots Community-Based Rehabilitation (CBR) program align with these global standards. Notably, the Simon of Cyrene Community Rehabilitation and Development Foundation, Inc. in Albay pioneered the shift from CBR to Community-Based Inclusive Development (CBID), focusing on broader inclusion, local government engagement, and empowering Disabled People's Organization (DPOs) through over four decades of inclusive programs across ten municipalities and cities in Albay.

Despite such efforts, major challenges persist. Research by Geronimo (2015) and Handicap International suggest that while enrollment in community groups exists, actual participation and inclusion of PWDs in meaningful community development remains minimal. Many groups lack activity, leaving members socially excluded. Moreover, economic opportunities for PWDs, especially in self-employment or micro-financing, are severely limited. Bongat (2019) further revealed that employment of

PWDs in Albay, while present, is hindered by recruitment biases, qualification concerns, and workplace adaptation issues.

Compounding these issues are structural inequalities rooted in the persistent charity or medical model disability – one that sees PWDs as dependent and burdensome, rather than as empowered stakeholders (Retief 2018). The narrative and lived experiences of PWDs are still underrepresented in policy-making and academic literature, particularly in the context of local communities such as those in Albay, which faces additional socio-economic and environmental vulnerabilities.

Thus, while frameworks like CBID offer promising avenues for inclusions, a significant gap remains in terms of documenting empirical evidence on the effectiveness of such community-based programs, especially from the perspective of persons with disabilities themselves. There is a need for localized, experienced-driven studies that examine the extent to which DPO empowerment and LGU partnerships translate to actual social inclusion, access to services, and economic participation.

Despite international frameworks like the UNCPRD and local initiatives such as the CBID program implemented by the Simon of Cyrene Foundation, persons with disabilities in Albay still face systemic barriers in accessing social, economic, and civic opportunities. While policies promoting disability rights are in place, their translation into inclusive practices at the community level remains uncertain and inadequately documented.

The problem lies in the disconnect between policy and practice, particularly in how empowered DPOs and partnership with LGUs influence the lived realities of PWDs. Moreover, community attitudes often remain rooted in the charity model, which undermines the autonomy and potential of persons with disabilities. There is limited empirical evidence that captures the effectiveness of CBD implementation in fostering genuine participation, access to services, and long-term inclusion.

1.1. Research Objectives

This study sought to explore and document the lived experiences of PWDs in Albay under the Community-Based Inclusive Development (CBID) framework to determine whether these initiatives lead to meaningful empowerment and societal participation. To address this, the research focused on several key areas: uncovering the lived experiences of PWDs involved in CBID programs; investigating PWDs' perceptions of their inclusion in social, economic, and political aspects of community life; assessing the extent of DPOs' and LGUs' contributions to PWD empowerment and advocacy; and identifying the persistent barriers that hinder the full participation and inclusion of PWDs in Albay communities. The final goal was to formulate recommendations to enhance CBID implementation and the responsiveness of local institutions to disability inclusion.

2. Literature Review

This section synthesizes relevant literature and studies that provide foundational theories, insights, and data regarding the organizing experiences of persons with disabilities (PWDs) in Albay.

2.1 General View on Disability

Globally, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) defines disability through the interaction of long-term impairments with environmental barriers that hinder full societal participation, while framing PWDs as rights-bearing individuals with economic potential. Similarly, the World Health Organization's (WHO) International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) framework categorizes disability as an umbrella term encompassing body impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions that dictate social functioning. However, traditional medical and social work perspectives have historically reduced disability to an individual pathology or "sick role," positioning PWDs as passive, dependent recipients of curative interventions rather than capable, autonomous citizens (Gilson & Depopy, 2000; Knapp & Midgley, 2010; Mitra, 2006; WHO, 2017).

In the Philippines, the rights, accessibility, and socioeconomic inclusion of PWDs are legally protected under a robust statutory framework. Republic Act 7277 (the Magna Carta for Persons with Disabilities) – as amended by RA 9442, RA 10754, and RA 10070 – secures vital privileges, mandates digital and civic spaces for marginalized voices, and establishes institutional mechanisms like the Persons with Disabilities Affairs Office (PDAO) across local government units to streamline services (Alper & Goggin, 2017; Beyond Education, 2021). Furthermore, Batas Pambansa Bilang 344 (the Accessibility Law) strictly mandates barrier-free physical environments, public utilities, and infrastructure. Despite these comprehensive legal mandates designed to foster entrepreneurial potential and civic engagement, PWDs continue to face persistent social barriers and non-inclusive environments that obstruct their full integration into mainstream society.

2.2. Disability Statistics

Globally, the World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that 15.6% or 785 million people over 15 years old live with a disability, with 18% residing in developing countries. This population has surged – doubling between 2006 and 2021 – primarily driven by an aging global population facing late-life functioning restrictions (Giles et al., 2003), alongside an estimated 150 million children with disabilities worldwide (UNICEF, 2013). Nationally, the 2010 Philippine Census on Population and Housing (PSA, 2013) reported that 1,442,586 Filipinos (1.57%) experienced disabilities, with Region IV-A showing the highest proportion and CAR the lowest. While males slightly edge out females overall at 50.9%, the ratio flips dramatically among seniors aged 65 and over, where females significantly outnumber males at a 100-to-70 ratio due to longer life expectancy (PSA, 2013). These high numbers are fueled by systemic factors; the Asian Development Bank (ADB, 2005) identified the root causes of disability in the Philippines as poor health and nutrition, unsanitary living conditions, limited prenatal care, incompatible traditional health practices, vehicular accidents, disasters, and geopolitical instability in the south.

At the provincial level, a localized random cross-sectional survey in Albay by Hodge et al. (2016, 2017) utilized Washington Group and UNICEF methodologies to reveal an adult disability prevalence of 6.5%. The data underscored a higher prevalence in rural and highland areas, exposing a massive unmet demand for support services, education, and employment, alongside a widespread lack of basic rights awareness among persons with disabilities (PWDs). To address these gaps, the study advocated for increased

investment in targeted communication, the mapping and coordination of Community-Based Rehabilitation (CBR) and health services, and strategic partnerships to locate unreached individuals. Strengthening localized prevalence surveys is critical to building an evidence base that improves service quality and coverage across these rural sectors (Hodge et al., 2017).

Complementing these findings, a rapid assessment by Marella et al. (2016) in District 2 of Quezon City and Ligao City, Albay, found that adult disability prevalence in these areas exceeded the 2010 national census estimates. Their analysis revealed that disability is more heavily concentrated among older and less-educated demographics, correlates with reduced civic participation, and triggers high levels of unaddressed psychological distress. Crucially, Marella et al. (2016) demonstrated that integrating Disabled People's Organizations and PWDs directly into research teams successfully builds local capacity and bridges the gap between the disability community and policymakers. Ultimately, these statistics highlight that robust CBR integration, effective cross-sector communication, and coordinated service delivery are vital to securing the constitutional rights and benefits mandated for PWDs across the Philippines.

2.3. Disability and Development

A profound bidirectional relationship exists between disability and economic status, forming a self-perpetuating disability-poverty cycle where poverty increases the likelihood of acquiring a disability, and living with a disability simultaneously exacerbates financial hardship (World Bank, n.d.; Braithwaite & Mont, 2009, as cited in Geronimo, 2015). This systemic link is globally apparent, with 80% of persons with disabilities residing in developing countries (WHO, 2011). Although education serves as a primary pathway out of poverty, over 90% of children with disabilities in these developing nations are excluded from school (UNESCO, 2012). This institutional exclusion and marginalization severely diminish their opportunities to contribute productively to their households and communities, directly amplifying their vulnerability to poverty by restricting access to both academic institutions and the labor market (Schelzig, 2005; Gertler & Guber, 2002, as cited in Mitra et al., 2011). Local academic research, such as Cristal's (2010) study on parent organizations, corroborates these multidimensional hardships, demonstrating that disability imposes immense financial and emotional strains on entire families – often forcing parents to abandon employment to provide full-time care – which underscores the critical need for holistic, family-centered support services.

To mitigate these systemic disparities, government and non-government organizations have launched various initiatives, including the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), the establishment of the National Council for Disability Affairs (NCDA), and the development of a results-based Framework on Disability to track sectoral progress. However, existing vulnerabilities were severely magnified during the COVID-19 pandemic, which introduced profound uncertainties, exacerbated digital divides, and deepened the social exclusion of individuals with disabilities due to a lack of pre- and post-crisis provisions (Toquero, 2020). The pandemic exposed critical gaps across social, academic, and policy domains, reinforcing the urgency for inclusive emergency preparedness planning that safeguards the healthcare, mental health, and general well-being of this disproportionate population (Campbell et al., 2009; Toquero, 2020). Moving forward, it is vital for state and private entities to dismantle the social, environmental, attitudinal, and cultural barriers that

obstruct constitutional rights, while maximizing the use of assistive learning technologies and remote education to prevent further marginalized isolation (Toquero, 2020).

2.4 Community-Based Rehabilitation (CBR) Planning and Programming

According to the World Report on Disability, Community-Based Rehabilitation (CBR) serves as a critical component of healthcare and localization, leveraging local resources to optimize delivery. The World Health Organization guidelines implement this through the CBR Matrix, a comprehensive framework spanning five core components: Health, Education, Livelihood, Social Participation, and Empowerment (WHO, UNESCO, ILO, 2010). Aimed at reducing poverty and achieving inclusive development, CBR operates on six foundational pillars:

- i. Inclusion: Restructuring mainstream institutions to fit the needs of all citizens.
- ii. Participation: Ensuring persons with disabilities and their families actively drive program decisions and management.
- iii. Self-Advocacy: Organizing individuals to become the center of their own rehabilitation and rights lobbying.
- iv. Sustainability: Mobilizing community and local authority resources for lasting impact.
- v. Accessibility: Removing physical, attitudinal, and communication barriers.
- vi. Equal Opportunity: Ensuring equal access to life domains to help individuals reach their full potential (Simon of Cyrene, 2008; CBM, 2009).

In the Philippines, institutional CBR began in 1985 through the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) and the International Labor Organization (ILO), alongside parallel efforts by Local Government Units (LGUs) and Christoffel-Blinden Mission (JICA-PED, 2008). This national commitment was structurally reinforced by Executive Order 437 in 2005, which mandated LGUs to establish and fund dedicated CBR units. Rather than expanding to new geographic areas indefinitely, modern CBR strategic frameworks focus on a localized Theory of Change. This strategy actively builds the capacity of core leaders within local Disabled People's Organizations (DPOs) so they can take the lead in CBR implementation and policy collaboration with LGUs, thereby shifting the paradigm from passive care to structural, rights-based community development (CBM, 2009; Simon of Cyrene, 2019).

Sector-specific programs and innovative technological integrations further strengthen this inclusive ecosystem. For instance, public-private partnerships utilizing blended funding streams have successfully operationalized the WHO wheelchair service provision guidelines, treating personal mobility not just as a medical need, but as a basic human right that transforms family and community life (WHO, 2009; McSweeney, 2019; Walters, 2020). Similarly, in remote Philippine communities, the integration of telerehabilitation for speech-language pathology has emerged as a highly viable CBR approach, maximizing information and communication technologies (ICT) to bridge geographical barriers for stakeholders (Ponciano-Villafania, 2022). Ultimately, contemporary frameworks suggest a profound shift in social development practice – re-framing disability from *kapansanan* (disability) to *ka-pasan* (co-burden bearer) to foster true disability justice and build completely unified communities (Muego, 2020).

2.5. People with Disabilities: Issues and Challenges

The lived experiences of persons with disabilities (PWDs) are defined by persistent physical, institutional, and social barriers. Mendoza's (2023) narrative of "Hannah"—a commuter facing public transportation hazards, an indifferent driver, and initial government neglect before finally reclaiming her dignity—serves as a microcosm for the everyday struggles of the sector. PWDs routinely navigate highly inaccessible environments and social degradation, frequently treated with public alienation (Arceo-Dumalo, 2013). These hardships are profoundly intensified by intersectional vulnerabilities:

- i. **Poverty:** Forcing reliance on unaccommodating infrastructure.
- ii. **Gender & Age:** Exposing women to exploitation during care and leaving children or the elderly vulnerable to peer alienation and physical limitations.
- iii. **Geography:** Isolating individuals living far from municipal centers or rehabilitation facilities (UNICEF, 2013; UN ESCAP, 2012; WHO, 2011).

Compounding these struggles, families of PWDs face a steep financial premium, routinely incurring substantial out-of-pocket expenses for basic healthcare, assistive technologies, personal assistance, and specialized transit options just to secure a baseline standard of living (WHO, 2011).

2.5.1. Educational Barriers and Institutional Inequity

In developing nations, structural inequality severely compromises a PWD's right to education. Historically, tens of millions of primary school-aged children with disabilities remain entirely out of school or experience staggering dropout rates (EFA Global Monitoring Report, 2007; UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2008). Physical infrastructure integration alone proves insufficient; as Jouko (2010) asserts, educational systems must pivot toward pedagogical inclusion, adapting instructional strategies directly to the distinct circumstances of excluded populations rather than relying on simple system expansion. This institutional mismatch is highly apparent in local settings: a Philippine survey revealed that 16.9% of school heads reported students dealing with distinct learning challenges that demanded unprovided specialized attention (*A View Inside Primary Schools*, 2008). Because educational disadvantages compound from primary through tertiary levels, systemic failures continuously bar PWDs from advancing academically.

2.5.1. Economic Marginalization and the Employment Gap

These educational gaps transition directly into severe economic marginalization, shown in Table 1. While 59% of the Philippine PWD population falls within the economically active age range of 15 to 64 years old (PSA, 2012), they remain locked out of traditional labor markets. In developing nations like the Philippines, unemployment rates for working-age PWDs soar to nearly 80%, with those lucky enough to find work facing volatile job security and depressed wages (ILO, 2007; United Nations, 2007). Focus studies within urban centers like Metro Manila highlight this structural trap: Only half of the PWD population holds income-generating jobs, 40.8% subsist below the poverty threshold, and a mere 29% earn at or above the legal minimum wage (Mori & Yamagata, 2009; Yap et al., 2009).

Table 1: Socioeconomic Realities for PWDs

Metric Type	Statistical Findings
Global SME/Formal Job Generation	Over 50% (World Bank, 2016)
Unemployment Rate (Developing)	~80% (United Nations, 2007)
PWD Income Below Poverty Line	40.8% (Mori & Yamagata, 2009)
PWDs Earning Minimum Wage or More	Only 29% (Yap et al., 2009)

Because traditional employment is scarce, rural communities and PWDs frequently pivot toward self-directed wealth creation and small-to-medium enterprises (SMEs) to build alternative avenues for regional equity and prosperity (Harley et al., 2018; World Bank, 2016). Ultimately, these persistent socioeconomic deficits endure because of a pervasive failure to properly manage disability-related statistics or fully enforce protective state mandates (Odashiro, 2008; UN ESCAP, 2012).

3. Research Methods

3.1. Research Design

This study employed a multiple case study design to explore the real-life experiences of Disabled People's Organizations (DPOs) in Albay, utilizing a case study approach characterized by the in-depth investigation of a contemporary issue within its actual context (Creswell and Poth 2018; Yin 2018). Each DPO served as a distinct "case" for detailed examination of its experiences, challenges, and strategies for promoting inclusion, with data triangulated using multiple sources – including interviews, observations, and document reviews – to gain a comprehensive understanding of each organization (Hoover 2021). All participants shared a common connection to the study's focus on community-based inclusive development for persons with disabilities, and the synthesized insights from these cases ultimately formed the basis for the proposed social development framework for DPOs.

3.2. Participants and Sampling

The study employed purposive sampling to select participants capable of providing rich, relevant information (Nikolopoulou 2022). Researchers chose ten Disabled People's Organizations (DPOs) in Albay based on their formation through community-based organizing initiatives and a history of being active for at least five years. Additional considerations included the participants' willingness to engage in extended interviews and the depth of their experiences with disability inclusion.

Each selected DPO participated in a focused group discussion (FGD) and provided input for the subsequent case study. Before participation, all individuals signed an informed consent form that outlined the study's purpose, procedures, and confidentiality measures. Permission was explicitly obtained to record interviews, take photographs, and utilize the collected narratives solely for research purposes.

3.3. Instrumentation

Data collection centered on Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) conducted with the ten selected DPOs in Albay, with the researcher coordinating arrangements through the Provincial Disability Affairs Office (PDAO) and utilizing a guide to ensure coverage of all research objectives. Each FGD involved DPO officers and members, with the researcher

moderating and a rapporteur documenting the discussion; the process emphasized building rapport and encouraging the open sharing of stories, experiences, and challenges, allowing participants to speak freely beyond the guide questions for richer insights. To ensure accuracy, the rapporteur read back the recorded minutes at the conclusion of each session, and participants reviewed and confirmed the transcripts before finalization.

3.4. Data Analysis

Following the FGDs, the researcher utilized thematic analysis (Table 2), a qualitative data method involving the identification, analysis, and reporting of the repeated patterns across the dataset to understand the experiences, thoughts, or behaviors of the participants (Kiger and Varpio 2020). This approach actively constructed themes – or meanings – from the data to answer the research questions, specifically using pattern matching to ascertain the experiences of persons with disabilities in organizing DPOs in Albay, which the researcher facilitated through the creation of an analytic outline.

Table 2: Table of Analysis of Information.

Problem	Sources of Data	Data Needed	Tools Used
1.What are the stories of organizing of Disabled Persons organizations (DPOs) in Albay?	Agency documents i.e., annual/ semestral reports, electronic database interview to DPO officers	Previous records/ reports Shared responses of study participants' experiences along organizing	Records and existing documents Study participants' interviews Direct observation Interview Guide
2. What are the challenges encountered by the Persons with Disabilities?	Agency documents Interview to study participants	Previous reports shared responses on the challenges encountered by the DPOs	Document review Study participants' interviews Focused group discussions
3.What strategies have been employed to address the challenges experienced by the Persons with Disabilities?	Interview with study participants (DPOs)	Shared narratives of the participants on the strategies employed to address the challenges experienced	Focus group discussions/ interviews Direct observation
4.What insights can be drawn from the experiences of the Persons with Disabilities?	Interview with study participants (DPOs)	Recommendations/ Insights drawn from the responses of the key participants	Study participants' interviews Interview Guide

4. Results

4.1. The Ten Cases

Presented in Table 3 are the 10 DPOs who participated in the study through the FGDs done. The ten Disabled Persons' Organizations (DPOs) in Albay revealed common themes in their evolution, strengths, challenges, and gaps, often originating from either Simon of Cyrene CBR programs or LGU/MSWDO initiatives, with most achieving SEC

registration, LGU recognition, and extensive barangay coverage as key milestones. A major strength across the cases was their active engagement in advocacy, livelihood projects, and disaster preparedness, often leading to representation in local decision-making bodies. However, significant and pervasive challenges and gaps included limited financial resources or irregular funding, the lack of stable, sustained income sources leading to dependence on LGUs, and persistent PWD-unfriendly infrastructure and accessibility barriers in public spaces, indicating a need for more consistent LGU support and implementation of long-term economic strategies.

Table 3: The 10 Case Studies

Case	Evolution	Strengths	Challenges	Milestones	Gaps
Case 1	Started in 2008 with MSWDO support; SEC registration in 2017; grew from small core group to registered DPO.	Long-term persistence; SEC registration; LGU recognition.	Late formalization; slow LGU support.	Registration with SEC; increased visibility.	Weak early linkages; delayed formal organization.
Case 2	Originated from Simon of Cyrene CBR program; barangay-level expansion; strong LGU links.	Early barangay organization ; livelihood projects; disaster preparedness.	Limited resources for sustained livelihood; dependence on LGU.	Full barangay coverage; disaster readiness training.	Lack of stable income source.
Case 3	Organized through LGU/MSWDO initiatives; early legal identity.	Legal recognition; inclusion in local councils; sports/cultural activities.	Inadequate accessibility in infrastructure .	Representation in decision-making bodies.	Infrastructure gaps; limited outreach to remote barangays.
Case 4	Started from Simon of Cyrene training; grew through capacity building.	Unified members; leadership commitment .	Limited funds; irregular LGU engagement.	Accreditation; skill-based trainings.	Funding stability; continuous LGU support.
Case 5	Informal gatherings to legal DPO; full barangay coverage; city-wide federation.	Strong community gardening; festive participation ; active PDAO.	Seed capital shortage; impractical trainings.	Rehabilitation center; sports and cultural involvement.	Inconsistent LGU meeting schedules; equipment shortage.
Case 6	Emerg ed from health services outreach; later linked with Simon of Cyrene.	Health-focused programs; assistive device distribution.	Irregular funding; lack of livelihood sustainability.	Medical outreach; health aid distribution.	Absence of long-term income strategies.
Case 7	Originated from	Advocacy	Budget	Livelihood	Limited

	local advocacy; structured barangay organizations.	strength; disaster readiness; assistive device access.	constraints; dependency on LGU.	support; active LGU partnerships.	independen t funding streams.
Case 8	From informal group to SEC-registered DPO; linked with PDAO and SB.	Wide range of livelihood programs; rehabilitation center.	Training not matched with resources; irregular LGU meetings.	Disaster preparedness training; sports/cultural participation.	Equipment and seed capital shortage.
Case 9	Began before Simon of Cyrene; later integrated into LGU systems.	SB and SEC accreditation ; strict ID issuance; office renovation.	Budget shortages for CBR; poor law implementation; infrastructure inaccessibility	Mini-rehabilitation center; inclusion in local councils.	Political interference in PDAO appointments; infrastructure gaps.
Case 10	From informal to SEC-registered; barangay coverage; strong LGU links.	Community gardening; livelihood integration; incentives for officers.	PWD-unfriendly infrastructure .	Exclusive PWD fund allocation; vehicle procurement; PhilHealth for all.	Accessibility barriers in public/government spaces.

5. Discussion

5.1. Thematic Analysis on the Stories of Organizing of DPOs

Behind every face is a story. Behind every story is a page of life – a story of every person marked by experiences and the passage of time. Having entered into the page of life of the persons with disabilities by recording their past and the hope for their future, it is but fitting to capture their images in the context of understanding the challenges that the PWDs have experienced and the lessons learned from their shared stories. To be more specific, the PWDs shared some common themes as culled from their stories, namely (1) from shared struggles to shared responsibility: a driving force for change; (2) from individual strengths to collective action: capitalizing on personal capabilities and moving forward; and (3) from relation-based to action-based organizing: formalizing the once informal structure towards better welfare.

The evolution of PWD sector's organization reflects a journey from informal beginnings to strategic collective action and eventually to formalized structures that strengthen their social and economic participation.

5.1.1. Theme 1: From Isolation to Inclusion – Building Foundations for PWD Organizing

Early organizing efforts emerged from shared experiences of marginalization, where individual members often navigated personal and societal barriers alone. The initial stages were marked by loose, relationship-based networks that allowed mutual support but lacked formal recognition and resources. This phase highlights what Chambers (1997) described as participatory development, where communities initiate change based on lived realities before external structures are imposed. The critical milestone

came when these groups began to recognize the necessity of structures organization to amplify their voices and secure tangible benefits from local and national government programs.

5.1.2. Theme 2: From Individual Strengths to Collective Action – Capitalizing on Personal Capabilities

Once established, the sector shifted focus to leveraging members' unique skills, talents, and entrepreneurial abilities toward shared goals. The organizing principle resonates with Andres' (2018) emphasis on bayanihan (cooperative endeavor) and nakatayo sa sariling paa (self-reliance) as cornerstones of genuine community development – rejecting dependency and embracing shared responsibility. This strategic harnessing of individual strengths aligns with Morgan's (2006) concept of appreciative inquiry, which builds on existing capacities to inspire innovation, resilience, and collective achievement. Notably, PWD entrepreneurs played pivotal role, showing that economic participation could be a vehicle for social empowerment and group sustainability.

5.1.3. Theme 3: From Relations-Based to Action-Based Organizing – Formalizing for Better Welfare

The progression toward formalization marked a decisive turn in the sector's trajectory. Registering with the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) and obtaining LGU recognition opened pathways to official support, livelihood projects, and greater political visibility. This formalization was not merely administrative – it required advanced interpersonal and networking skills to navigate government processes, collaborate with NGOs, and build rapport with diverse stakeholders. Practical initiatives such as communal vegetable gardening exemplified action-based organizing, where resource pooling and shared labor yielded both economic gains and strengthened bonds. These activities echo Woolcock and Narayan's (2000) framework on social capital, where trust and cooperation lead to sustained collective outcomes.

The experiences of the PWD sector revealed a clear evolutionary pattern: social cohesion born from shared struggles, strategic capacity-building through mobilizing individual strengths, and institutional empowerment via formal recognition and structured programming. Despite this progress, critical gaps persist, particularly in ensuring equitable participation across all disability types, especially for those with severe impairments who often face physical, social, and economic barriers to engagement (Shakespeare et al. 2021). Furthermore, while current livelihood initiatives show promise, their limited scaling and diversification constrain long-term income security and resilience (International Labor Office 2020).

Equally pressing is the need to institutionalize leadership development to mitigate the risk to organizational continuity caused by over-reliance on a few highly active individuals (Hailey 2006). Addressing these challenges requires sustained investment in capacity-building, targeted skills enhancement, and multi-sector partnerships that connect PWD organizations with government agencies, civil society, and private sector actors (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2021). Such collaborative approaches are vital for creating a robust ecosystem that not only achieves but also equitably sustains inclusive growth.

5.2. Thematic Analysis on Challenges Encountered by Person with Disabilities

It has been shared by the Persons with Disability that they often felt neglected by the government or authorities such as the MSWDOs. Even the government physical structures are not PWD-friendly, thus significantly affect their mobility. They further said that there's the presence of "favoritism" in terms of appointment of PDAO, a political reality that is unfavorable to the sector. Likewise, some organizations of PWDs have no access to funds, hence they are at the mercy of the people given the authority to manage their funds. These are some of the identified themes based on the participants' narratives, which to be discussed one by one.

5.2.1. Theme 1: Unfavorable Political Realities and Indifference of Authorities

Despite internal cooperation and commitment within DPOs in Albay, members reported significant political and institutional barriers to meaningful participation, including the appointment of Persons with Disability Affairs Office (PDAO) heads through the "backer system," which often results in less empathetic, non-disabled appointees (Beyond Education 2021). This is compounded by instances where Municipal Social Welfare and Development Offices (MSWDOs) demonstrated neglect – such as ignoring DPO presence or cancelling activities despite having underspent budgets – attitudes potentially rooted in persistent medical-model views of disability (World Health Organization and World Bank 2011; Mitra 2006; Gilson & Depoy 2000), which see PWDs as passive recipients rather than capable contributors, further reinforced by dependency-oriented social work approaches (Knapp & Midgley 2010). Nonetheless, DPOs demonstrated resilience and capacity by independently implementing projects and managing allocated funds when given the opportunity and resources.

5.2.2. Theme 2: Limited Access to Resources of DPOs

Despite annual budget allocations for registered and LGU-recognized DPOs, access to these funds often depends on MSWDO approval, limiting autonomy for some organizations. While certain DPOs manage their own projects, others face delays in budget approval, particularly for mobility and travel support. Assistance such as mobility devices is provided by support institutions, but members in remote areas struggle to participate in meetings due to transportation costs and lack of accessible facilities. Even government offices frequently lack ramps or elevators, contradicting Batas Pambansa Bilang 344 (Accessibility Law), which mandates barrier-free access in public and private spaces (Beyond Education 2021).

Barriers to participation are compounded by the digital divide and pandemic restrictions, underscoring the need for policies that ensure PWDs can exercise their rights to access, participation, and representation in both physical and digital environments (Alper and Goggin 2017).

5.2.3. Theme 3: Utilization of Resources/Fund Mismanagement within the Organization

Some DPOs discovered a report from previous administration about the underspent budget for persons with disabilities. They have found out that they have an actual annual budget of PhP600,000.00, but no consultation was done in the past so that the allocated amount will be spent for them. To think that they had several proposed activities in that year but because the MSWDO was always busy, and since the funds were lodged in their

office, the scheduled meetings and activities were always cancelled. However, despite their discovery, they chose to keep their good relationship with the MSWDO, praying that they can resolve their differences. Additionally, at present, the budget officer would usually give them a copy of the projects initiated by the MSWDO for the PWD-sector. Even the DILG officer would tell them to plan and implement their programs and projects themselves by utilizing their sector's allocated budget. The officer even added, to encourage them, that it is up to them to plan and implement their programs and projects while utilizing their budget for their sector; and to not always wait for the approval of the MSWDO.

5.3. Thematic Analysis on Strategies Employed by Persons with Disabilities

Persons with Disability acknowledged numerous challenges in organizing and managing their DPOs but actively employed strategies to address them. These included using formal communication methods, seeking technical support from NGOs, and lobbying for their needs. Such mechanisms enabled them to navigate difficulties and sustain their organizations' operations and advocacy efforts.

5.3.1. Theme 1: Strategies to Address Political Realities

DPOs coped with political challenges by employing formal communication (e.g., written requests), lobbying for needs, and building strong relationships with stakeholders through active participation. These actions reflect both problem-solving coping strategies – direct actions to address issues – and emotion-focused strategies – managing relationships and emotions to reduce stress (Taylor and Stanton 2007). Aligned with the principles of participatory development (Opaluwah 2016), these strategies empowered DPOs to influence decisions, engage with institutions, and enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of development efforts.

5.3.2. Theme 2: Strategies on Limited Access to Resources

To address limited access to resources, PWD groups bypassed the Municipal Social Welfare and Development Office (MSWDO) and approached local chief executives directly to fast-track program approval and fund utilization, preparing proposals for livelihood, capacity building, and assistance programs beyond typical seasonal activities. Support from the NGO Simon of Cyrene further strengthened their advocacy through grants, assistive devices, and awareness campaigns. Grounded in RA 10070, which mandates PDAO offices, these actions reflect the resilience defined by Norris et al. (2008) – the capacity to adapt and sustain functions despite adversity – manifested through leveraging social networks and family ties for resources and advice, maintaining independent-minded leadership by lobbying official directly, and securing essential resources through institutional support from government, NGOs, and civil society partnership.

5.3.3. Theme 3: Strategies to Address Issues in Resource Utilization by Persons with Disability Organizations (DPOs)

Starting often without financial resources, Persons with Disability (PWD) organizations developed creative and effective strategies to sustain their activities by cultivating both internal resources and external partnerships. Internally, DPOs began by collecting modest membership dues and initiating small-scale, income-generating activities such

as producing meat products, candles, or liquid soap, which generated the essential operational funding. Externally, they maintained cooperative relationships with barangay councils to access meeting venues and leveraged partnerships with institutions like PhilHealth, DOH, TESDA, DTI, and DOLE for equipment, materials, and support for their livelihood programs.

These strategies effectively cultivated both financial and social capital, highlighting how DPOs enhanced their resilience by leveraging institutional and social capital, consistent with the Community Capitals Framework (Flora and Flora 2013). Their approach aligns strongly with Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) by focusing on mobilizing internal strengths rather than relying solely on external aid (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993). Furthermore, their experience reflects Social Capital Theory, demonstrating that strong relational networks and trust enable access to knowledge, opportunities, and sustainable income-building, a phenomenon observed in rural entrepreneurship (Osei and Zhuang 2020). Through innovation, mutual support, and strategic alliances, these DPOs successfully transformed meager beginnings into viable and sustainable organizational foundations.

5.4. Themes on the Insights Drawn from the Experiences of the Persons with Disabilities

5.4.1. Theme 1: Breaking Stereotypes: “PWeDe pala!”

The theme “**PWeDe pala!**” captures the critical realization that PWDs, given opportunities and support, are capable of active community participation and excellence, including contributing to policymaking and accessing benefits through formalized DPOs. Organized DPOs in the Philippines empower members to influence policies and services, aligning with global initiatives, such as the Northern Cape wheelchair service project, which demonstrates the transformative impact of public-private partnerships on mobility and inclusion (World Health Organization 2023). This realization fundamentally supports the concept of “*Ka-Pasan*,” which re-envision PWDs as active contributors to social development rather than passive beneficiaries, thereby promoting inclusivity, strengthening community organizing, and advancing disability justice by recognizing PWDs as capable of doing “ordinary things extraordinarily” (Muego 2020).

5.4.2. Theme 2: Focusing on the Person, not the Impairment

Persons with Disability (PWD) organizations (DPOs) demonstrate strong self-governance at the barangay level, actively involving members in decision-making and project implementation, which promotes independence and challenges the traditional charity-based perception of PWDs as passive beneficiaries by advocating a developmental perspective focused on equality, inclusivity, and empowerment through skills training and livelihood programs. This local organizational strength is critical given the survey findings in Albay (Hodge et al. 2017) that revealed a 6.25% disability prevalence, primarily in rural areas, coupled with significant unmet needs in education, employment, and access to rights-based information, necessitating coordinated community-based rehabilitation (CBR), improved service provider communication, and targeted outreach to underserved communities to effectively address these gaps.

5.4.3. Theme 3: Including the Excluded – Transforming Perspective through Collaboration and Shared Desire for Better Outcomes

Through organizing and persistent engagement, PWDs have successfully fostered a shift from societal exclusion to inclusive collaboration, redefining their role as active contributors deserving of respect, participation, and rights. By forming local Disabled Persons' Organizations (DPOs) across Albay, PWDs established collective platforms that catalyzed broader institutional recognition, aligning with national frameworks like the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCPRD) and mechanisms such as the National Council on Disability Affairs (NCDA) (National Council on Disability Affairs 2025).

The necessity for this shift is underscored by the reality that exclusion restricts PWDs' ability to contribute and increases the risk of poverty (Asian Development Bank 2009), while barriers in education and employment perpetuate marginalization (Mitra et al. 2011). This highlights the urgency of adhering to Community-Based Rehabilitation (CBR) guiding principles – including inclusion, participation, self-advocacy, and equal opportunity (International Disability and Development Consortium 2012). Effective CBR programs operate as multi-sectoral, participatory systems that empower PWDs beyond medical interventions through social, economic, and educational inclusion (World Health Organization 2017). By engaging in policy-making, livelihood development, and inclusive programming, DPOs have demonstrated competence and leadership, actively challenging stereotypes and fulfilling key social development goals, thereby embodying the core ideals of empowerment and sustainability central to both CBR and social development practice.

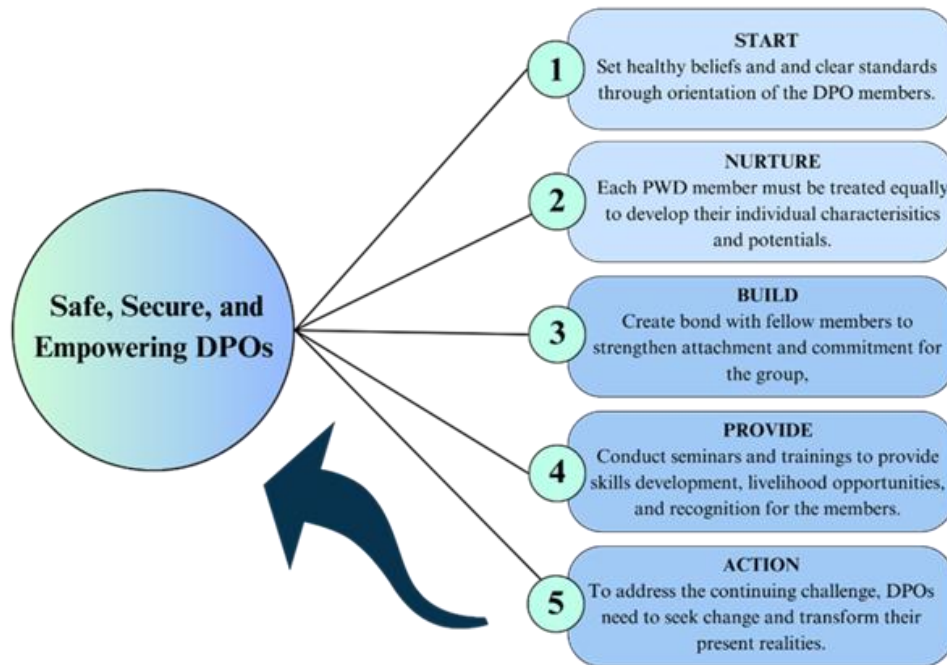
5.5. “PWeDe Pala!”: a Framework for a Safe, Secure, and Empowering DPO

Drawing from the lived experiences of DPO officers, volunteers, and the PDAO, a developmental framework – termed “PWeDe pala!” – was conceptualized to guide the creation of safe, secure, and empowered Disabled Persons' Organizations (DPOs). This framework mandates the integration of core organizational components that strengthen protective factors for Persons with Disabilities (PWDs). A foundational element is Establishing Healthy Beliefs and Clear Standards through comprehensive orientations for members, addressing both their rights (anchored in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2008) and their roles and responsibilities as active citizens. Leaders emphasized that this balances development theories, which find empowerment most sustainable when individuals recognize themselves as both rights-holder and contributors to collective well-being (Chiappero-Martinetti, von Jacobi, and Signorelli 2015; World Health Organization 2011).

Furthermore, the framework promotes Socially Responsible Behavior through Community Support, recognizing that clear standards communicated by DPO leaders and the community foster protective actions and discourage isolation (Scior et al. 2020). Sustainability hinges on Integrating Multi-Sectoral Collaborations, which involves partnering with local governments, NGOs, and sectoral agencies to ensure adequate resourcing for orientations, capacity-building, and advocacy. This aligns with WHO's Community-Based Rehabilitation (CBR Guidelines, which emphasize multi-sector engagement as critical for long-term disability inclusion (World Health Organization 2010). Ultimately, the PWeDe Pala framework stresses Building a Culture of Inclusion and Mutual Responsibility, asserting that true inclusivity requires cultivating a shared

sense of responsibility among members and the wider community, thereby strengthening protective factors by fostering trust, safety, and belonging (Mitra et al. 2013).

Figure 1: “PWeDe Pala”: A Framework for Safe, Secure and Empowering DPO



Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) in Albay have adopted a multifaceted approach to empowerment through Disabled Persons' Organizations (DPOs). Strategies include nurturing individual members' unique skills via seminars, livelihood training, and educational mainstreaming, ensuring equal opportunities for employment in line with Republic Act 7277 or the Magna Carta for Disabled Persons (Philippines 1992). Successful livelihood initiatives, such as cooperative-based furniture manufacturing, have demonstrated the potential for economic self-reliance and social reintegration of marginalized members.

Social bonds within DPOs are strengthened through regular meetings at the barangay, municipal, and provincial levels, creating safe spaces for communication, planning, and mutual support – an approach consistent with community-based rehabilitation (CBR) principles (World Physiotherapy 2019). Leadership by PWDs themselves, coupled with technical and financial assistance from provincial and local governments, has further enhanced organizational capacity.

Capacity-building activities, including leadership training, skills workshops, and recognition programs, not only enhance employability but also boost self-confidence and social participation (Mitra et al. 2013). Sustaining these gains requires continuous action – strengthening partnerships, maintaining inclusive standards, and fostering environments free from discrimination (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2015). This integrated framework reflects global best practices for promoting the rights, participation, and dignity of PWDs in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (*Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* 2008).

6. Conclusion

The ten case studies of Disabled Person's Organizations (DPOs in Albay demonstrated that despite varied contexts, all began as small, grassroots groups driven by shared determination and advocacy, often initiating before formal intervention by local government units or NGOs. These early stages were characterized by common struggles like discrimination, limited resources, and uncertainty. However, through shared experiences and strategic development, DPO leaders and members recognized their own "abilities" – their capacity to organize, lead, and advocate effectively. This recognition fueled their pursuit of legal registration, enabling them to transition from passive recipients of aid to active agents of change by planning and implementing their own livelihood programs and capacity-building activities.

A key aspiration across these groups was to have the Provincial Disability Affairs Office (PDAO) headed by a person with disability, ensuring empathetic representation and effective lobbying for necessary projects, budgets, and institutional support. The DPOs consistently demonstrated resilience and self-reliance by working within systems to advance disability-friendly solutions. To ensure their organizations remained safe, secure, and empowering, they identified four core priorities: instilling healthy beliefs and clear standards through orientation, developing individual capacities, strengthening member bonds and commitment, and continuous skills development, livelihood initiatives, and recognition programs.

These four interconnected strategies have successfully fostered an environment where members feel valued and supported. By consistently implementing these priorities, the DPOs have built stronger, more sustainable organizations that champion the dignity and rights of persons with disabilities in Albay, ensuring their efforts contribute to both individual growth and collective advancement.

7. Recommendations

The study's recommendations underscore the importance of sustained advocacy, leadership, autonomy, capacity-building, and systemic collaborations in empowering Persons with Disability (PWD) organizations to move beyond marginalization:

7.1. Promote Awareness and Institutional Recognition

DPOs should continue sharing their experiences to foster societal recognition. This aligns with "nothing about us without us" principles, which emphasize self-representation in advocacy (World Health Organization 2022) and is echoed in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), affirming that PWDs must be at the heart of policymaking.

7.2. Lobby for Representation and Resources

DPOs are urged to actively engage with Local Government Units (LGUs) and support institutions. Studies reveal that only about 60% of LGUs have a designated Persons with Disability Affairs Office (PDAO), limiting service delivery and inclusivity (Alampay, Cureg, and Quebral 2018). Strengthening PDAO presence is vital for advancing PWD welfare.

7.3. Cultivate Capable Leadership and Institutional Presence

Ensuring each city or municipality has a competent PDAO with lived experience is key. Guiding legislation – RA 10070 and its implementing circulars – mandate PDAO establishment, inclusive selection processes, and PWD participation in general assemblies (Philippines, Department of interior and Local Government 2017).

7.4. Champion Organizational Autonomy and Proactivity

DPOs should assert independence, spearheading their own programs rather than becoming passive recipients. This mirrors the Community-Based Rehabilitation (CBR) model, which promote local ownership, participation, and social inclusion through grassroots action (Pasamonte 2024).

7.5. Ensure Transparent Access to Budget and Opportunities

DPOs must be informed about budget allocations and employment programs. National legislation – Republic Act 7277 (Magna Carta for Disabled Persons) – guarantees employment access and government representation for PWDs (UNCRPD), reinforcing the principle of equal opportunity.

7.6. Build Organizational Foundations for Inclusivity

A safe, empowering DPO requires:

- i. Orientation on Rights, Roles, Responsibilities – instilling awareness and accountability
- ii. Nurturing Individual Capacity – training members to leverage their strengths and break cycles of exclusion (Aldaba 2009).
- iii. Strengthening Intra-DPO Bonds – creating safe, communicative spaces for mutual support.
- iv. Skills Development and Recognition – offering livelihood and leadership opportunities enhances empowerment and morale.
- v. Sustained Action and Collaboration – to sustain progress, DPOs must maintain partnerships across sectors, backed by inclusive values.

7.7. Foster a Safe, Inclusive, Empowering Environment

Achieving dignified inclusion requires sustained collaboration between PWDs, NGOs, government, academia, and civil society – reflecting the disability justice principle of leadership by those most affected, as advocated by Sins Invalid (2023).

These recommendations underscore that empowerment is systemic, demanding grassroots initiative, legislative support, inclusive governance structures, and intersectoral collaboration. By anchoring DPO development in integrative, rights-based strategies. Persons with Disabilities can transform from marginalized groups to empowered architects of their social inclusion.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

This study adheres strictly to the ethical principles outlined in the National Ethical Guidelines for Health and Social Research in the Philippines and the Data Privacy Act of 2012 (Republic Act No. 10173). It has been reviewed and granted ethical clearance by the Bicol University Ethics Review Committee.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares no competing interests.

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