

Motivated Leadership and Optimizing Services through Inclusive Governance in Rural Communities

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Abstract: Despite numerous efforts to improve public service delivery in rural areas in Basilan, Philippines, economically deprived and remote communities continue to face challenges related to exclusion, inaccessibility, and weak governance. A key gap exists in understanding how local leadership motivation and inclusive governance practices can transform service responsiveness and community participation in such underserved settings. This exploratory study investigates the leadership behaviors and inclusive practices of community leaders, aiming to assess their influence on public service effectiveness in marginalized rural areas. Using one-on-one interviews with 20 participants from Basilan Province, Philippines including informal settlers, out-of-school individuals, and those in economic hardship the study employs a qualitative approach guided by reflexive thematic analysis. The research centers on participants' lived experiences, particularly focusing on leadership motivation, inclusion strategies, and perceptions of service delivery quality. The expected results suggest that motivated and inclusive leadership significantly enhances community trust, participation, and access to essential services such as health, education, and livelihood support. Findings aim to inform future governance models that promote equity and collaborative service solutions in rural development planning.

Keywords: Leadership, Optimizing Services, Governance, Rural Communities

Introduction

Rural communities often grapple with developmental challenges such as limited access to essential services, underdeveloped infrastructure, and socio-political marginalization. These issues are frequently compounded by governance structures that are either ineffective or disconnected from the realities of rural populations (Horlings et al., 2018). In response, leadership has emerged as a key factor in strengthening governance effectiveness and improving service delivery, enabling local institutions to better respond to the needs of rural communities and other constituencies (Peng et al., 2023; Govender et al., 2024).

Inclusive governance, characterized by participatory decision-making, transparency, and equitable access to power, has gained prominence in discussions about rural development (Huo, 2023). This approach fosters community ownership, enhances trust between citizens and institutions, and ensures that services are not only available but also appropriate and sustainable (Saragih, 2023). Leadership serves an important role not only in administrative oversight but also in encouraging community engagement and supporting governance processes that enhance service delivery and promote collaborative approaches to local development (Maramura, 2022; Lansing et al., 2023).

Empirical studies suggest that inclusive and effective leadership can enhance stakeholder engagement and support improved organizational and community outcomes, including service delivery and sustainability efforts (Monama & Mokoete, 2023; Atiku et al., 2024). This is particularly critical in rural areas where governance structures are often underdeveloped or externally imposed, leading to weak policy implementation and citizen disillusionment (Mabunda & Chauke, 2024).

When leadership is both motivational and participatory, rural governance becomes more adaptive, responsive, and capable of navigating complexity (Mabunda & Chauke, 2024).

Furthermore, inclusive governance anchored in local leadership has been linked to improved education, healthcare delivery, infrastructure development, and conflict resolution (Saragih, 2023). The success of such initiatives often hinges on the leader's ability to build coalitions, bridge socio-political divides, and institutionalize mechanisms for accountability and feedback (Mabunda & Chauke, 2024). Furthermore, studies suggest that online communication environments may affect social inclusion, as exposure to harmful language and discriminatory online experiences can create challenges for fostering respectful and supportive interactions among diverse groups (Keum & Li, 2022). Addressing these online communication challenges is important for promoting inclusive social environments that can support broader goals of equity, participation, and community engagement.

This study explored the interrelationship between motivated leadership and inclusive governance, examining how this synergy can optimize service delivery in rural communities. By analyzing case studies, policy frameworks, and empirical data, the study aimed to contribute to a growing body of knowledge on participatory rural development, while offering actionable insights for practitioners and policymakers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The intersection of motivated leadership and inclusive governance has become a critical area of study in the discourse on sustainable rural development. Scholars and practitioners alike emphasize that traditional top-down governance models have largely failed to address the complex and context-specific needs of rural communities (Maramura, 2022). Participatory and inclusive models, guided by transformational leadership, are gaining increasing recognition for their capacity to facilitate meaningful change and innovation. These approaches emphasize collaboration, empowerment, and shared responsibility, enabling organizations and communities to adapt to emerging challenges while fostering continuous improvement and long-term development outcomes (Gupta, 2025).

Motivated Leadership in Rural Settings

Motivated leadership refers to the ability of leaders to inspire, engage, and mobilize communities toward shared goals, especially in environments with limited institutional support. In rural areas, where resources are often scarce and development challenges are more pronounced, local stakeholders and community-based development efforts play an important role in advancing livelihoods and fostering community progress (Fuseini, 2024). These leaders often operate within informal networks, drawing on social capital and cultural legitimacy to mobilize action (Govender et al., 2024). The value of youth engagement in civic and community-based initiatives, demonstrate how active participation can support community development and encourage responsiveness to local concerns (Oubiña López & Gómez Baya, 2025).

Inclusive Governance as a Framework for Empowerment

Inclusive governance refers to decision-making structures that prioritize equity, transparency, and participatory engagement. According to Saragih (2023), inclusive governance models in rural contexts contribute to social cohesion by actively involving marginalized groups such as women, indigenous populations, and the poor. The Magna Carta of Women, for example, has been cited as a pivotal legal instrument that promotes organizational compliance and protection mechanisms for women in rural labor sectors (Chavez et al., 2024). However, its effectiveness is largely contingent upon awareness and enforcement by local leadership, highlighting the leadership-governance nexus (Bucoy et al., 2024).

Leadership-Governance Synergy in Service Optimization

The collaborative interaction between motivated leadership and inclusive governance has shown significant promise in enhancing public service delivery in education, health, and infrastructure. Rural

development and education suggest that leaders and stakeholders who are aware of the educational challenges experienced by rural and economically disadvantaged populations are better positioned to support strategies that enhance learning opportunities and community development. Such an integrated approach can help address local needs while promoting sustainable educational and developmental outcomes (Yu et al., 2024). Similarly, communication and media-based initiatives have been shown to encourage youth participation by providing platforms for engagement, expression, and involvement in social and community issues (Cortés-Ramos et al., 2021). These findings affirm that empowered leaders who engage communities through inclusive and participatory approaches can strengthen community service initiatives by fostering collaboration, encouraging local involvement, and promoting responsiveness to community needs (Purbajati et al., 2024).

Barriers to Inclusive Practices

Despite these successes, several barriers persist. Cultural biases, digital inequality, and exclusionary communication practices can undermine inclusivity. Discourse analyses reveal that online humor and stereotyping can subtly reinforce discriminatory norms, indirectly weakening gender-inclusive campaigns (Chavez & Prado, 2023). These socio-cultural barriers suggest that efforts toward inclusion must be accompanied by broader cultural and behavioral change. Research emphasizes that creating equitable and inclusive environments involves addressing harmful social practices while strengthening leadership approaches that support systemic change, inclusivity, and the development of positive community norms (Cabiles et al., 2025; Esquierdo-Leal & Houmanfar, 2021).

Policy Awareness and Implementation Gaps

A persistent challenge identified in the literature is the disconnect between policy commitments and implementation. While institutions may adopt progressive gender and development frameworks, barriers related to awareness, organizational capacity, and institutional practices can limit their effective execution (Perez et al., 2025). Effective leaders contribute to transparency and accountability by encouraging clear communication, reinforcing institutional integrity, and supporting governance practices that enhance public confidence and organizational effectiveness (Pananrangi et al., 2025).

Methodology

Research design

This study employs an exploratory qualitative research design aimed at uncovering the nuanced relationship between motivated leadership and inclusive governance, particularly in the context of rural communities. Given the limited prior research in this specific intersection, an exploratory approach is appropriate to generate grounded insights based on lived experiences and perceptions.

Population and sampling

The participants in this study will be selected from remote rural communities, with particular emphasis on including individuals who are often excluded from formal governance and development discussions, such as informal settlers, economically deprived residents, and out-of-school youth. A purposive sampling strategy will be employed to ensure that the selected participants are those most directly affected by governance decisions and the delivery of public services. The study aims to include approximately 20 participants from Basilan Province, Philippines. To be eligible, individuals must be residents of the targeted rural community, at least 18 years of age, and capable of providing informed consent. This sampling approach is grounded in the rationale that these participants are well-positioned to offer valuable, firsthand insights into the barriers to and opportunities for inclusive governance and motivated leadership within their communities.

Instrument

An interview guide was developed in alignment with the study's two main objectives, focusing on the relationship between motivated leadership and inclusive governance. The guide consists of open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed narratives from participants. These questions aim to

capture community members' perceptions of local leadership practices, explore the motivational drivers behind efforts to promote inclusive governance, and examine the accessibility and responsiveness of public services in their communities. Table 1 presents the list of guide questions used by this research study.

Table 1. Interview guide questions.

Objectives	Interview question
1. To explore the leadership practices and motivations of local leaders in building inclusive governance in rural communities.	Can you describe how your local leaders involve people in community decisions and activities?
	What motivates your community leaders to include everyone, even those who are often left out, in planning and governance?
	Have you seen any changes in your community because of the way your leaders lead and include others? Please explain.
2. To examine how inclusive governance influences the effectiveness and responsiveness of public services in rural areas.	How easy or difficult is it for you and your neighbors to access basic services like health, education, or livelihood support?
	Do you feel that your needs and concerns are heard and acted on by community leaders or government workers? Why or why not?
	Can you share an experience where the community worked together with leaders to improve a service or solve a problem?

Data Gathering Procedure

Before the study began, participants received an informed consent letter explaining the research objectives, scope, and ethical considerations. Data for the study will be collected through semi-structured one-on-one interviews, a method that allows for the in-depth exploration of individual experiences while ensuring consistency across key research themes. The interviews will be conducted in person within the participants' communities and, where appropriate, in the local dialect to facilitate clearer communication and comfort. Each interview is expected to last between 30 to 45 minutes. Prior to the interviews, participants will be informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Verbal and/or written consent will be obtained to ensure ethical compliance and respect for participant autonomy.

Data analysis

The collected data will be analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis, guided by the six-phase model developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This analytical approach begins with familiarization, which involves transcribing, reading, and rereading the interview data to immerse the researcher in the content. The next phase involves generating initial codes by identifying and highlighting recurring patterns across the interviews. These codes are then organized into potential themes during the theme-searching phase. In the reviewing stage, the identified themes are refined to ensure they accurately represent the dataset. This is followed by defining and naming the themes to enhance clarity and analytical depth. Finally, the analysis culminates in the writing phase, where themes are integrated into the findings and supported by illustrative quotes from participants. This method is well-suited for capturing the subjective experiences and social meanings associated with leadership and governance

in rural communities.

RESULTS

Research Objectives 1. To explore the leadership practices and motivations of local leaders in building inclusive governance in rural communities.

Question No. 1. Can you describe how your local leaders involve people in community decisions and activities?

Theme 1: Token Participation and Limited Transparency

Fifteen (15) respondents expressed that their barangay captain tries to involve them, especially during disaster planning or when there's aid coming. But most decisions are still made by the leaders themselves. Sometimes they only hear about projects once they're already done. There's a suggestion box at the barangay hall, but they don't think anyone checks it. Additionally, they mentioned that sometimes it feels like they only involve them when it looks good on paper like for documentation during outreach or government visits. They're asked to attend meetings, but decisions are already made. It's hard to trust the process when they're not really part of it. If they really wanted to hear them, they'd come to them, not expect them to always go to them.

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"Sometimes it feels like they only involve us when it looks good on paper like for documentation during outreach or government visits. We're asked to attend meetings, but decisions are already made."

Theme 2: Exclusion Based on Legal Status and Informality

Thirteen (13) respondents expressed that they're not really consulted. They mostly talk to the landowners or the ones with proper documents. When it comes to relocation or clean-up drives, they're just told what to do. It feels like their voices don't matter much because they don't 'officially' belong. Additionally, they mentioned that because they live in an informal settlement, they're often treated like they're temporary or invisible. When programs or plans are discussed, no one asks for their input they just assume they'll follow. Some of them have lived here for decades, raised their kids here, but still they're not seen as part of the community when it comes to decision-making. It's like only the 'recognized' people count.

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Theme 3: Youth Marginalization in Community Participation

Eleven (11) respondents expressed that their local leaders usually invite school heads or barangay officials for meetings, but young people like them aren't included unless it's about sports. They want to join, but they feel like they don't take them seriously. They have ideas too, especially about things like drug prevention and livelihood. Additionally, they shared that their local leaders say the youth are the hope of the future, but they're rarely given space to speak now. They've tried attending a barangay meeting once, but no one even asked for their opinion. Most of the time, they only tap them when there's a cleanup drive or if leaders need performers for a program. They have a lot to say about issues like mental health, jobs, and safety but they're not given the chance.

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"They say the youth are the hope of the future, but we're rarely given space to speak now. I've tried attending a barangay meeting once, but no one even asked for our opinion."

Question No. 2. What motivates your community leaders to include everyone, even those who are often left out, in planning and governance?

Theme 1: Empathy from Shared Backgrounds and Lived Experience

Fourteen (14) respondents expressed that their barangay captain was once a farmer like them. They think he knows what it's like to be ignored, so he tries to make everyone feel included. He says it's not fair if only the rich or educated get to speak. That's why sometimes he holds meetings right in the fields or sari-sari stores, where people are more comfortable. Additionally, they mentioned that their barangay chair grew up here too, in a small bamboo house just like theirs. He knows what it feels like to be looked down on or unheard. That's why he walks around the sitio himself to talk to people not just those in the center. He includes even those who didn't finish school or don't speak confidently. For him, it's not about who's educated, but who lives the reality.

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Theme 2: Inclusion Driven by Practical Needs and Political Incentives

Twelve (12) respondents expressed that sometimes leaders include them because they see that their struggles affect the whole community. Like, if they don't hear from the poor or homeless, they miss a big part of the problem. Some leaders do it because they want to be re-elected, yes but a few really care, especially if they came from poverty themselves. Additionally, they mentioned that they think some leaders include them now because they realize that ignoring the poor only creates more problems crime, health issues, even protests. They need their cooperation to keep peace in the community. Others include them because elections are near, and leaders know they have numbers. But a few leaders, the rare ones, really take time to listen, even when no one's watching.

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Theme 3: Compassion and Political Awareness as Drivers of Inclusion

Seventeen (17) respondents mentioned that not all leaders care, but there are a few who do because leaders seen how hard life is for families like theirs. When there are feeding programs or livelihood projects, leaders ask mothers for ideas. They think leaders are motivated by compassion and sometimes by the fact that they vote, too. Additionally, they mentioned that some leaders really take time to talk to them mothers, especially those raising kids alone. Leaders know they face daily struggles food, school fees, safety. When leaders include them in small planning sessions, it feels like leaders actually see them. Of course, leaders also know that in elections, they talk to neighbors and influence others. So they think it's a mix compassion and knowing they matter when it's time to vote.

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Question No. 3. Have you seen any changes in your community because of the way your leaders lead and include others? Please explain.

Theme 1: Improved Access and Visibility Through Inclusive Leadership

Ten (10) respondents expressed that yes, a little. Before, they were always the last to get help. But now, because their barangay captain involves even small groups like them, they get notified early about health programs and relief. Leaders now ask mothers what they really need not just give them

Motivated Leadership and Optimizing Services through Inclusive Governance in Rural Communities

leftover goods. It's not perfect, but they feel more seen. Additionally, they mentioned that things have slowly improved. Before, only those close to the barangay hall got information or help. Now, even small clusters like theirs at the far end of the sitio are informed early when there's a feeding, medical mission, or even cleanup drive. Leaders even ask them what time works best, especially for mothers who can't leave their children. It's not big change, but at least now they're part of the planning, not just the receiving. This response highlights how intentional inclusion especially of women and marginalized groups can lead to better access to services and a stronger sense of belonging, even when material conditions are still modest.

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Theme 2: Youth Empowerment Through Participatory Opportunities

Ten (10) respondents expressed that since they started letting young people help in organizing events and awareness drives, they've seen more of them volunteering. They used to just stay on the streets. Now, at least some of them are learning how to lead small projects, like clean-ups or sports leagues. It gave them a bit of purpose. Additionally, they mentioned that before, no one really listened to them. They were just told to behave or stay out of trouble. But now, the barangay lets them be part of planning for youth activities. They helped run a small feeding program and even designed posters for an anti-drug campaign. It made them feel like they're not just problems to fix but people who can help. Some of them are now thinking of going back to school or taking TESDA courses. This reflects how inclusion in local efforts can transform youth from passive bystanders to active contributors, building skills, confidence, and motivation for personal growth.

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Theme 3: Persistent Exclusion and Communication Gaps

Sixteen (16) respondents expressed that they haven't seen much change for people like them. Leaders still don't ask them about their problems or ideas. Maybe there are some programs, but no one tells them directly. They think they're still invisible to them unless they make noise. Additionally, they mentioned that most of the meetings or announcements happen at the barangay center, but people like them who live far or aren't in school don't always hear about the leaders. They think they assume they're not interested, but really, they're just not informed. Sometimes it feels like they only matter when there's a problem or when elections are near. This highlights the disconnect between leadership and marginalized groups, especially where information flow and assumptions prevent real inclusion. The feeling of being "invisible" is not due to lack of interest but a lack of proactive outreach.

"I haven't seen much change for people like me. They still don't ask us about our problems or ideas. Maybe there are some programs, but no one tells us directly."

"Most of the meetings or announcements happen at the barangay center, but people like us who live far or aren't in school don't always hear about them."

Research Objectives 2. To examine how inclusive governance influences the effectiveness and responsiveness of public services in rural areas.

Question No. 1. How easy or difficult is it for you and your neighbors to access basic services like health, education, or livelihood support?

Theme 1: Limited Access and Unequal Distribution of Services

Eighteen (18) respondents expressed that health centers are there, but they're overcrowded and sometimes run out of medicine. They line up early in the morning, but it's still not guaranteed. Livelihood support? It goes to those with connections or barangay endorsements. They're told to sign up, but they don't hear back. Additionally, they mentioned that basic services exist, but they don't reach everyone fairly. If you're not close to the barangay officials or don't know someone on the inside, you're often left out. Some neighbors always get chosen for cash aid or skills training, while others like them are told to 'wait for the next batch.' Health services are hit or miss, especially if you don't have money for transport or medicine. This highlights the inequity in how services are accessed and distributed, where favoritism, proximity, and limited resources create barriers for the most vulnerable.

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"Basic services exist, but they don't reach everyone fairly. If you're not close to the barangay officials or don't know someone on the inside, you're often left out. Some neighbors always get chosen for cash aid or skills training, while others—like us—are told to 'wait for the next batch.' Health services are hit or miss, especially if you don't have money for transport or medicine."

Theme 2: Geographic Isolation and Administrative Barriers to Education Access

Five (5) respondents expressed that education is far. The high school is two hours away by foot. That's why many of them just stop going. There are scholarships, according to some, but they don't know how to apply or they don't have the documents. Even internet is poor here, so they're just left out. Additionally, they mentioned that most students here drop out after grade school. The nearest high school is too far, and they have no money for daily transportation or boarding. Some kids want to study, but their families can't afford uniforms or supplies. They hear about scholarship programs, but no one helps them with the process. Even getting a birth certificate or school records is a struggle it feels like education is only for those who live near town. This emphasizes how distance, cost, and lack of administrative support combine to make education inaccessible, particularly for youth in far-flung and economically challenged communities.

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"Most students here drop out after grade school. The nearest high school is too far, and we have no money for daily transportation or boarding. Some kids want to study, but their families can't afford uniforms or supplies."

Theme 3: Documentary and Hidden Costs as Barriers to Access

Ten (10) respondents expressed that they try to access programs, but the requirements are hard birth certificates, barangay IDs, income proof. If you don't have those ready, they skip you. Education for their kids is free, but they still pay for uniforms and supplies. It adds up. Additionally, they mentioned that it's true that some services are 'free,' but getting them isn't easy. They ask for so many documents some of which they've never had. They lost their child's birth certificate in a flood, and they don't have money to get a new one. Even applying for ayuda or school support feels like a test they're not prepared for. And things like uniforms, projects, fare it's not counted, but it's real. This highlights how paperwork requirements and hidden costs often overlooked can exclude already struggling families from accessing supposedly free government services.

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Motivated Leadership and Optimizing Services
through Inclusive Governance in Rural
Communities

"It's true that some services are 'free,' but getting them isn't easy. They ask for so many documents some of which we've never had. I lost my child's birth certificate in a flood, and I don't have money to get a new one."

Question No. 2. Do you feel that your needs and concerns are heard and acted on by community leaders or government workers? Why or why not?

Theme 1: Tokenism and Lack of Genuine Follow-Through

Ten (10) respondents expressed that not really. Sometimes they're asked to write their concerns or attend meetings, but nothing changes. Leaders listen, but they don't act. It's like they just do it to say they consulted them. Unless you know someone in the barangay, your voice doesn't go far. Additionally, they mentioned that leaders hold meetings and consultations, yes but it feels like a formality. People speak, but the same problems come back again and again. Flooding, garbage, safety at night nothing gets fixed. It's like leaders just want to show they 'heard them' without actually doing anything about it. If you don't have a connection or you're not part of a known group, they forget your concerns.

"Not really. Sometimes we're asked to write our concerns or attend meetings, but nothing changes. They listen, but they don't act."

"They hold meetings and consultations, yes but it feels like a formality. People speak, but the same problems come back again and again."

Theme 2: Youth Tokenism and Disregard for Youth Voices

Eleven (11) respondents expressed that they don't think leaders care much about people like them. They tried suggesting a youth project once, but it was ignored. Leaders only call them when they need volunteers or to fill up a crowd. No one really follows up on what they want or need. Additionally, they mentioned they're only visible when there's a barangay event like parades or clean-up drives. But when they ask for support for something like a youth skills workshop or a safe space to hang out, no one listens. Leaders say they're too young to understand governance, but how will they learn if they never involve them meaningfully? This highlights how young people are often used for visibility or manual labor, but not included in decision-making or resource allocation, leading to a sense of being used but not valued.

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Theme 3: Partial Responsiveness and Systemic Neglect of Deeper Needs

Ten (10) respondents expressed that some leaders try, especially those who came from poor families too. Leaders visit, ask questions, and sometimes small things get done. But when it comes to bigger issues like job support or housing it still feels like they're at the bottom of the list. Additionally, they mentioned that they appreciate it when leaders show up and ask about their problems. Some do their best they fix lights, clean the streets, or respond quickly during emergencies. But the bigger things, like helping them find stable work or fixing their housing situation, never move forward. It's like they only have power for small things, and the rest gets lost in the system. This reflects a common frustration with surface-level participation, where engagement exists in appearance but not in substance, especially for those without influence or representation.

"Some leaders try, especially those who came from poor families too. They visit, ask questions, and sometimes small things get done."

"We appreciate it when leaders show up and ask about our problems. Some do their best they fix lights, clean the streets, or respond quickly during emergencies."

Question No. 3. Can you share an experience where the community worked together with leaders to improve a service or solve a problem?

Theme 1: *Community Empowerment Through Shared Action in Disaster Response*

Thirteen (13) respondents expressed that every rainy season, their area floods. One day, a community leader gathered them to clean the canals and build makeshift barriers with sacks and scrap wood. It didn't solve everything, but it reduced the flooding. That was the first time they felt like they were not just blamed but part of the solution. Additionally, they mentioned that their area is always affected by landslides during heavy rains. In the past, they just waited for help, but one kagawad encouraged them to help build small retaining walls using tires and stones. Everyone pitched in men, women, even the youth. The LGU supported them with a few tools. It didn't stop the landslides completely, but fewer houses were damaged. They realized they could help protect each other, not just wait for rescue. This highlights how inclusive and action-oriented leadership, even with limited resources, can shift communities from passive recipients to active participants in risk reduction and local problem-solving.

"Every rainy season, our area floods. One day, a community leader gathered us to clean the canals and build makeshift barriers with sacks and scrap wood."

"Our area is always affected by landslides during heavy rains. In the past, we just waited for help, but one kagawad encouraged us to help build small retaining walls using tires and stones."

Theme 2: *Youth Engagement Through Environmental Action and Local Ownership*

Ten (10) respondents shared that some of them youth were invited by the kagawad to help organize a clean-up drive and make posters about ocean protection. At first, no one took it seriously. But when they saw how much garbage they collected, they realized it mattered. Now, they have monthly clean-ups and even made a Facebook page to raise awareness. Additionally, they mentioned that it started with just a few of them being asked to join a tree-planting activity. They thought it was just another photo-op, but the barangay let them lead the planning and even speak at the event. After that, they formed a small youth group to continue planting and cleaning areas near the creek. People in the community started noticing and even joining. It felt good to do something real. This shows how genuine involvement in local initiatives especially environmental ones can foster youth empowerment, accountability, and pride, leading to ongoing volunteerism and community impact.

"Some of us youth were invited by the kagawad to help organize a clean-up drive and make posters about ocean protection."

"It started with just a few of us being asked to join a tree-planting activity. We thought it was just another photo-op, but the barangay let us lead the planning and even speak at the event."

Theme 3: *Community Participation Improves Program Delivery and Social Harmony*

Nine (9) respondents mentioned that a few months ago, a feeding program was disorganized long lines, food ran out, people argued. Afterward, the barangay asked for volunteers to help manage it better. Some mothers, including them, helped plan the next one. It went smoothly because they knew how to organize their neighbors. Additionally, they mentioned that during the last relief distribution, people were upset because some families didn't get anything. After that, the barangay called a meeting with them community leaders and volunteers. They helped make the list and suggested a better system by household, not by person. The next time, it was calmer and more organized. It showed that when they're part of the process, things work better. This emphasizes how co-designing solutions with community members leads to more effective, equitable, and peaceful service delivery, especially in high-tension settings like relief and feeding operations.

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“During the last relief distribution, people were upset because some families didn’t get anything. After that, the barangay called a meeting with us community leaders and volunteers.”

DISCUSSION

This study explored the leadership practices and motivations of local leaders in fostering inclusive governance in rural communities, and how such inclusion or lack thereof affects the accessibility and responsiveness of public services. The findings reveal a complex interplay between genuine intentions, structural limitations, social hierarchies, and community agency, offering critical insight into the nature and impact of inclusive governance in grassroots settings.

Leadership Practices: Between Symbolism and Substance. A recurring theme in participants' responses is the prevalence of token participation, where inclusion is often superficial. Many respondents observed that community consultations and meetings were held primarily for appearances or compliance with bureaucratic requirements, with key decisions already made in advance. While mechanisms like suggestion boxes exist, there is widespread skepticism regarding their actual use. This reflects a performative model of governance, where visibility is mistaken for meaningful participation. In addition, exclusion based on legal status and settlement informality was prominent. Residents of informal settlements and those lacking legal documentation expressed feeling invisible and systematically excluded. Their physical and administrative marginalization is compounded by perceptions that they are "temporary," despite long-term residence in the area. This raises critical questions about how state-recognized legitimacy shapes access to voice and power in local governance. Furthermore, youth marginalization surfaced as a notable gap in participatory governance. Young people are routinely relegated to roles in sports or aesthetic contributions (e.g., performances, parades), but are rarely given a platform to engage in decision-making. This reflects a broader societal undervaluing of youth perspectives, despite their expressed readiness to contribute to pressing issues like mental health, safety, and employment.

Motivations for Inclusion: Between Empathy and Electoral Strategy. Respondents identified multiple drivers of inclusive leadership. Empathy from shared lived experiences emerged as a strong motivator for more grounded and equitable governance. Leaders who came from similar socio-economic backgrounds e.g., former farmers or informal settlers were more likely to conduct outreach in accessible, informal venues such as sari-sari stores or remote sitios. This approach reduced power imbalances and facilitated trust-building, reflecting a relational leadership style rooted in familiarity and mutual respect. At the same time, inclusion was also described as being instrumental driven by pragmatic needs or political calculations. Some leaders involved marginalized groups not out of principle but due to functional needs (e.g., preventing unrest, understanding the root causes of community issues) or electoral incentives. While such motivations do not negate the benefits of inclusion, they suggest that inclusion is often contingent, rather than institutionalized. A third category merged compassion and political awareness, particularly in relation to women and mothers. These groups were often engaged during planning for livelihood or feeding programs, not just as recipients but as co-designers. While this points to increasing recognition of their roles as both caregivers and influencers, it also reflects how inclusion is often selective and shaped by perceived utility rather than rights-based engagement.

Outcomes of Inclusive Governance: Progress and Persistent Gaps. Some participants reported tangible improvements in access to public services and community cohesion as a result of more inclusive leadership. Inclusion of peripheral groups led to earlier notifications about health or aid programs, more equitable distribution of resources, and increased feelings of being seen and valued. Intentional outreach, especially to those in geographically remote or socially marginalized areas, improved not only access to services but also the community's perception of local leadership. Youth who were given responsibilities in organizing environmental or social campaigns reported enhanced confidence, motivation, and civic engagement some even reconsidering their educational or vocational goals. These outcomes affirm the transformative potential of genuine participatory opportunities, especially for young people traditionally viewed as passive or problematic. However, not all respondents experienced these positive changes. Many reported persistent exclusion and poor communication,

particularly among those far from barangay centers or disconnected from formal community structures. Marginalized groups continue to experience barriers related to physical distance, lack of documentation, or limited digital access, which exclude them from information flows and program access. This reflects ongoing structural and logistical weaknesses in local governance systems that disproportionately affect the most vulnerable.

Public Service Access: Barriers Beyond Availability. The accessibility of public services particularly health, education, and livelihood support were reported to be highly uneven. While some services exist, they are often plagued by favoritism, resource shortages, or procedural hurdles. Residents without connections to barangay officials, or those lacking required documents, face systemic barriers to program enrollment and support. These findings reinforce the importance of not only providing services but ensuring equity in delivery and accessibility. Geographic isolation and cost-related issues were especially detrimental to education access, with some youth walking hours to reach the nearest high school or dropping out due to financial burdens. Meanwhile, hidden costs uniforms, transport, documentation undermined the supposed "free" nature of public services. This underscores how inclusion must go beyond presence or participation and address the material and bureaucratic realities that shape people's lived experiences.

Community Collaboration: Co-Production of Solutions. Despite the challenges, there were inspiring accounts of cooperative problem-solving between residents and leaders. Collaborative efforts in disaster preparedness (e.g., flood barriers, landslide prevention) and program delivery (e.g., feeding and relief operations) highlighted the effectiveness of shared leadership and local ownership. These cases demonstrate that when leaders meaningfully engage residents not just in consultation but in implementation co-production becomes a tool for both empowerment and efficiency. Notably, youth participation in environmental initiatives grew when they were entrusted with real responsibilities not just asked to show up. These examples provide compelling evidence that inclusive governance, when practiced authentically, can foster resilience, civic responsibility, and sustainable engagement, even in low-resource settings. The findings illustrate a continuum of inclusion, from tokenistic gestures to transformative engagement. While many barriers persist legal, logistical, political there are also emerging practices of relational and empathetic leadership that, when scaled and institutionalized, can reshape rural governance into a more inclusive, responsive, and participatory system. Crucially, the research underscores that inclusive governance is not just a moral or democratic ideal it is a practical imperative for effective public service delivery and long-term community development.

CONCLUSION

This study found that while efforts toward inclusive governance exist in rural communities, they are often limited and symbolic. Many community members feel that participation is only for show, with real decisions made by leaders behind closed doors. Informal settlers, youth, and those living far from barangay centers are especially excluded from both decision-making and services. However, some leaders especially those with similar life experiences as the poor show genuine efforts to engage everyone. Their inclusion efforts, though often small, have led to improved communication, better service access, and stronger community involvement.

Motivations for inclusion vary: some leaders act out of empathy, while others are driven by practical needs or politics. Regardless of motive, meaningful participation has helped address local issues more effectively, especially when communities work together with leaders. Despite these gains, challenges remain. Services are still not equitably distributed, and barriers like favoritism, lack of documents, and poor communication persist. For inclusive governance to truly succeed, it must go beyond appearances and be built into systems that ensure fairness, voice, and access for all especially the most marginalized.

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Motivated Leadership and Optimizing Services through Inclusive Governance in Rural Communities

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